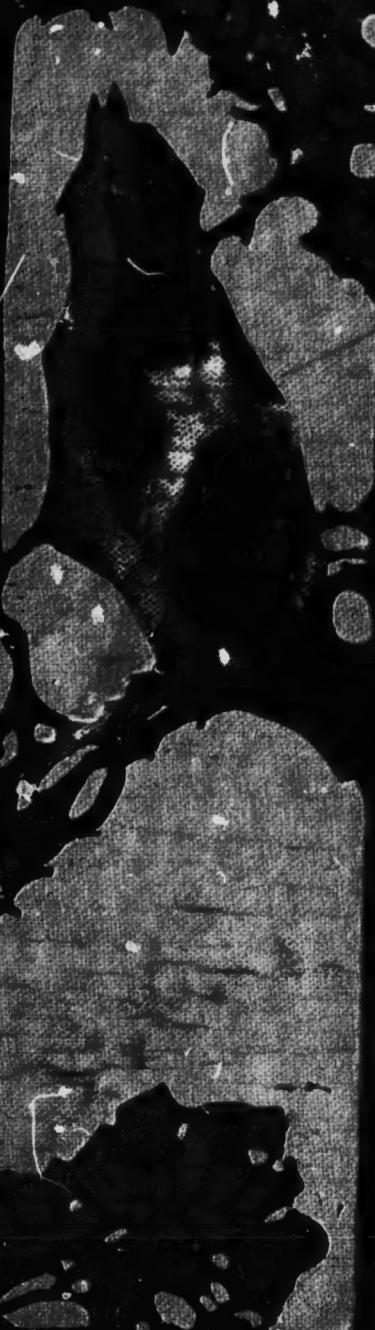
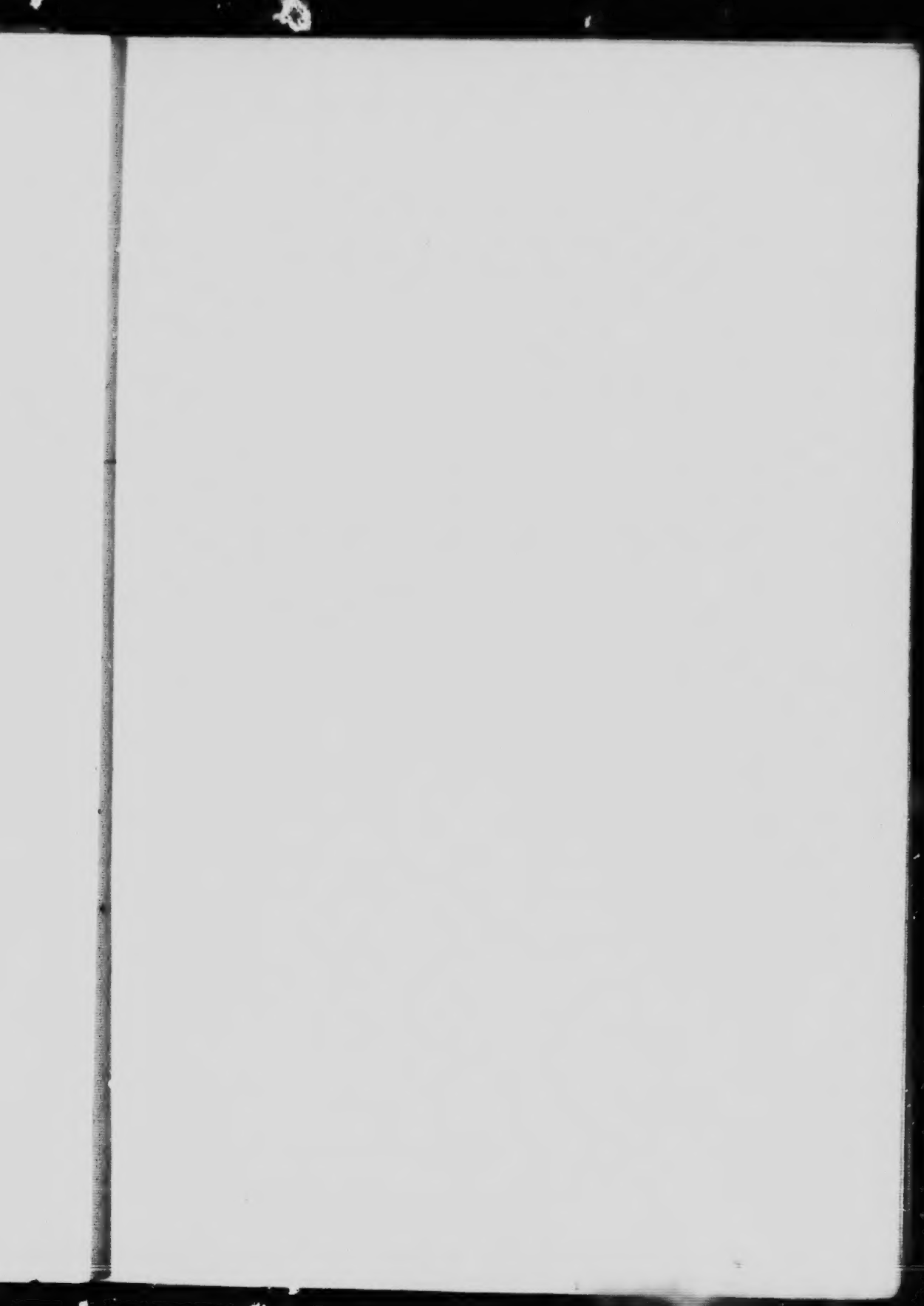


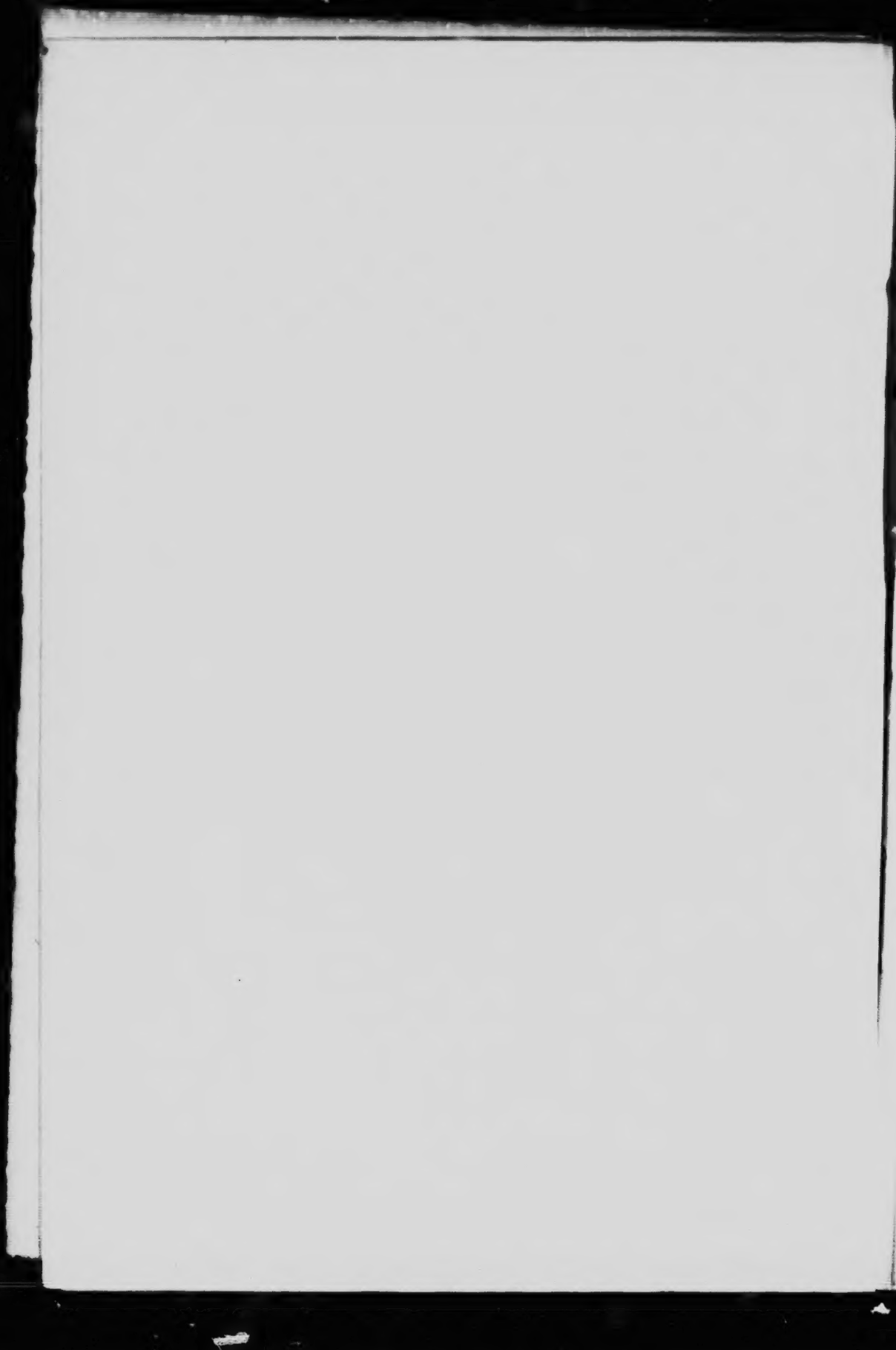
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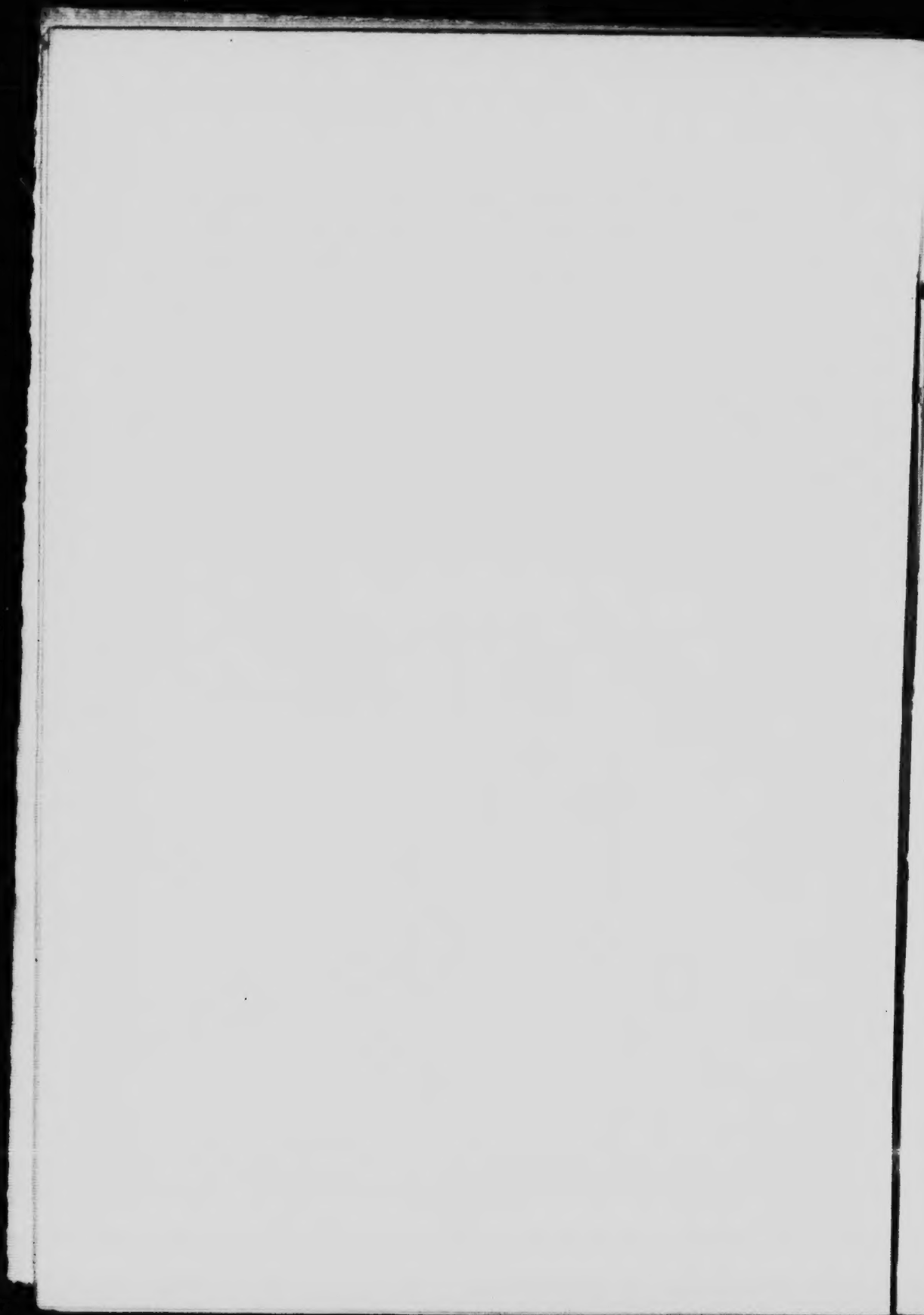
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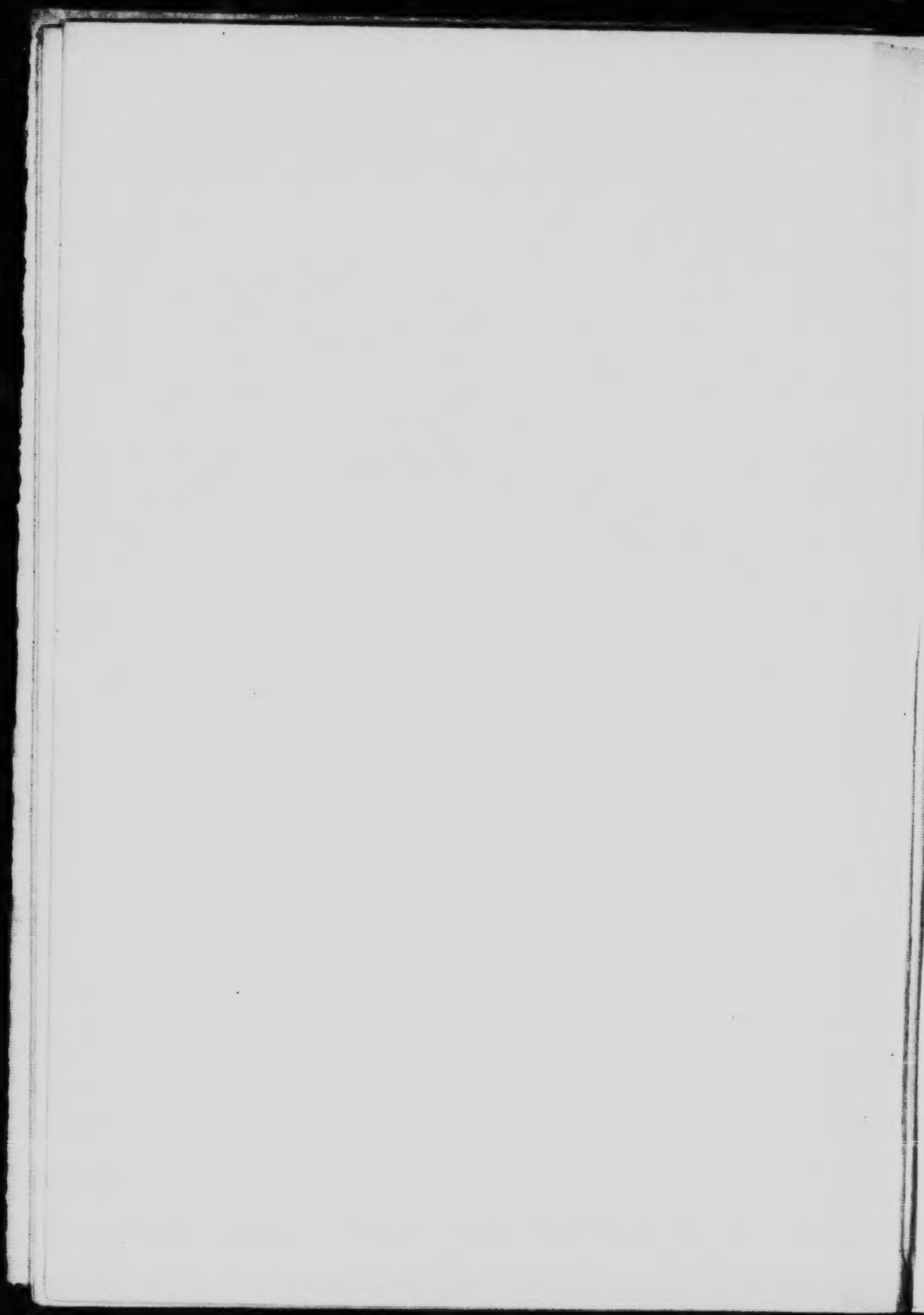
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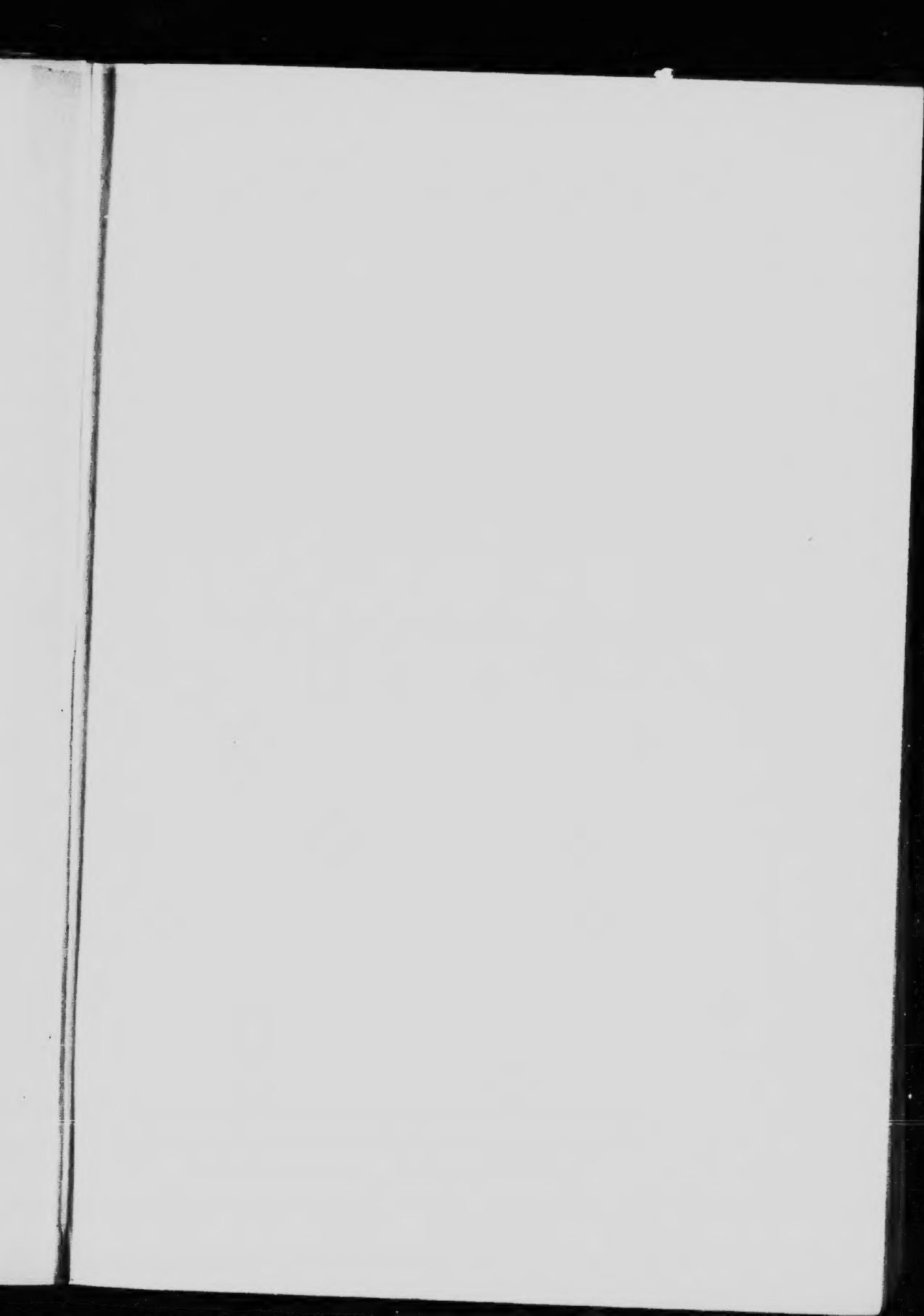














"I'M NOT ENGAGED TO HIM, AND..." PAGE 307

THE COUNTRY BOY



by
Charles
Sarver

from the play by
Edgar Selwyn

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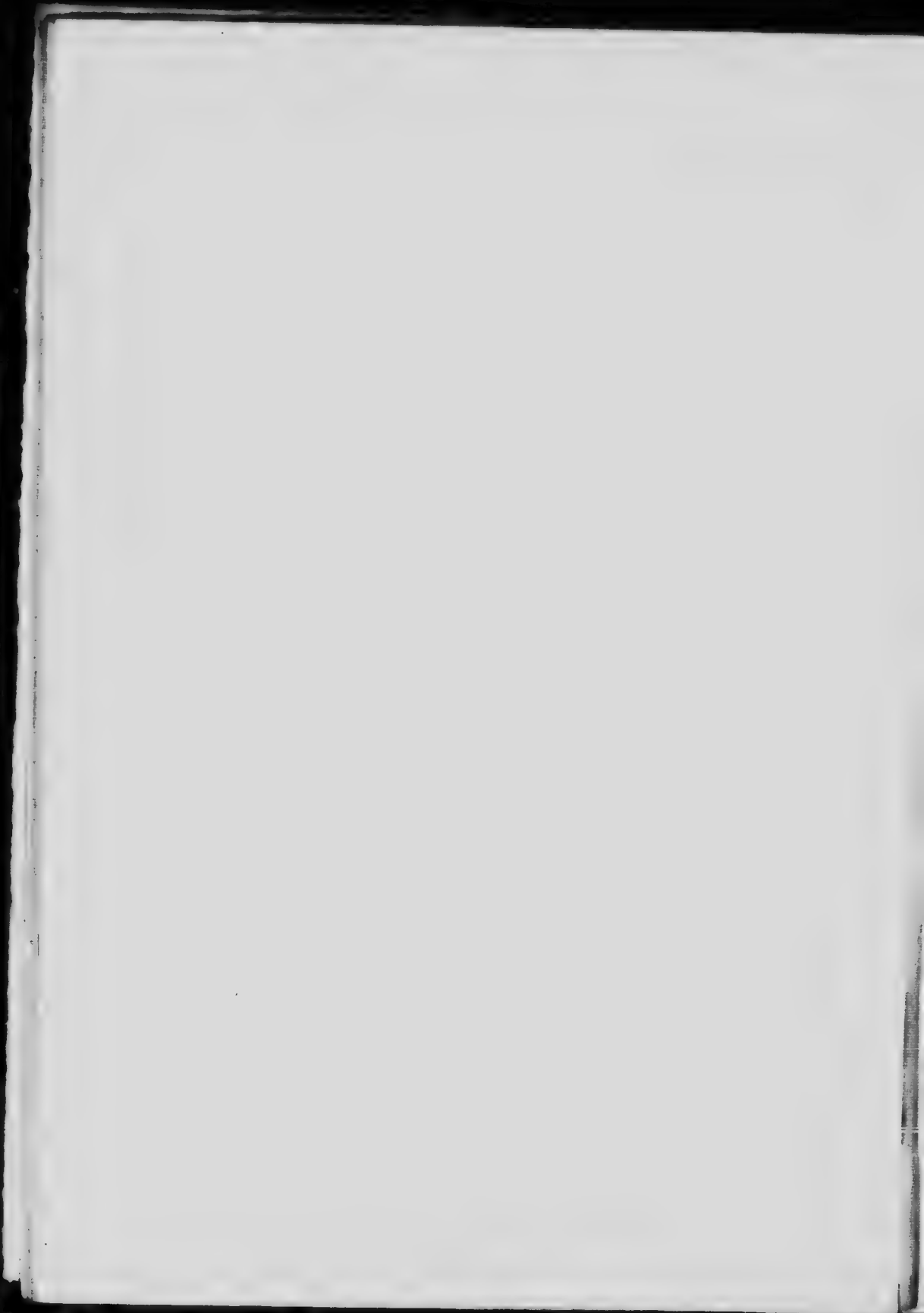
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CHAPTER I

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS

FARMER HEMINGWAY draped his lean body over the barnyard gate and gazed expectantly down the main road towards the lake. At a respectful distance from Farmer Hemingway stood a heavy boots, a gaunt black sow and her puny nursinglings grunted in various keys of impatience. The black sow kept a ravenous eye on an ear of corn, which protruded, big, yellow and tempting, from the rear pocket of the farmer's overalls. The piglets ran and manoeuvred for position along her flanks and moved uneasily to and fro.

It was a perfect morning in mid-autumn, a morning fit to charm the hearts of pigs and men from temptations of hunger and avarice. Clear over the turquoise horizon rolled pasture and the field, dotted with white farmhouses. Here and there the low hills were crowned with woods where brilliant ochres and deep purples blended softly under the yellow rays of the October sun already some hours high. A smell of baked earth rose to the nostrils. Across the road a flock of red-winged blackbirds wheeled and lighted in the meadow with great chattering.

Shifting his eye ever so slightly, Farmer Hemingway, from where he leaned, might have centered in his field of vision the rippling, blue lake, five miles to the eastward. Over his left shoulder lay the pleasing prospect where the village of Fairview notched the sky-line with its dozen steeples, three miles away.

But Farmer Hemingway's senses were not attuned this morning to the harmonies of Autumn. He had other fish to fry. A mile from the barnyard gate, the road ran for a short distance along a hillside in plain view, then dipped down again out of sight in the valley. It was on this stretch of road that Farmer Hemingway strained his keen, gray eyes. Each moment his ears assured him of the continued attendance of the black sow and her litter, unconscious accomplices and destined victims of a dark design, in making ready for which, he had robbed the sow of her breakfast. His olfactories were occupied, with the full flavor of plug tobacco.

Long minutes passed. Farmer Hemingway's satellites grew more hungrily obstreperous. A frown gathered on Farmer Hemingway's brow. He drew from his pocket the big silver watch, by which existence on the Hemingway acres was measured. His lips moved as he conned the formula on which his plot and his hopes of booty were based.

"Five miles to the lake. Six miles around. Five miles back — at thirty miles an hour." That

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was Tom Wilson's average gait, and Farmer Hemingway, his ambushade all prepared, had reckoned on it. What could the matter be?

It was more than half an hour since Judge Belknap's shiny, new automobile had passed, outward bound from Fairview, with Tom Wilson at the steering wheel and the Judge's pretty daughter at his side. If Tom and Jane were taking their usual morning spin around the lake, they were over-due back. Farmer Hemingway knew. He had made it his business to observe their motoring habits.

Up the sile a low rumbling, faint as a distant drum. Farmer Hemingway's weary eyes brightened. By that token he knew that Tom Wilson had thrown out his muffler to take the hill at speed. The sound came sharper. There was a flash of red along the brown hillside. Farmer Hemingway's loosely hung members assembled themselves for quick action. There was no time to waste, for Tom Wilson was driving furiously.

With one swift motion the rickety gate was thrown open. The black pigs looked up in alarm, ready to stand or bolt as his next move should determine. He flung down the fat, yellow ear on the spot where he had been standing.

For a moment the black sow eyed him with suspicion. Then hunger triumphed over maternal misgivings. With sharp grunts of satisfaction she bore down upon the tempting morsel, her ill-fated

progeny tumbling after. Farmer Hemingway circled to the rear, half-crouched there and waited, with both ears cocked.

From around a bend in the road, screened by foliage, came the hum and splutter of a motor, a sharp Honk-Honk, hardly one hundred yards away. A moment longer and then, waving his long arms, Farmer Hemingway charged down upon the doomed family.

The litter scattered before him. The black sow grabbed up the ear of corn and rushed after, out into the highway. The automobile, clear of the bend, thundered down upon them at top speed.

To the ears of Farmer Hemingway, crouching behind the gate, came a shout, a girl's shriek, a chorus of appalling squeals, cut short by thuds as the car swept by under brakes. The air seemed full of flying pigs. Almost at the moment of contact, Tom had swerved into the ditch, thereby avoiding collision with the heavy sow, but multiplying her items of bereavement. He straightened out his machine and, as it slowed, looked over his shoulder to take note of casualties. The girl jumped from her seat, and, standing with her hand on Tom's shoulder, stared back with a white face.

Farmer Hemingway rushed out into the road with an oath.

"You'll pay for this, Tom Wilson. You'll pay well for this," he screeched in well simulated anger.

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"The finest bred Berkshires in New York State, and you've killed —" he stopped to count heads and to catch his breath. Five pitiful little black bodies were scattered along the roadside. The five survivors had fled to their mother's side. The black sow was munching the last of the fatal ear.

Tom Wilson grinned sweetly at the irate farmer. Tom couldn't pay for anything and nobody knew it better than Hemingway.

"Come and see me," he cried amiably. "And be sure you come during office hours. And by the way," he went on, his face sobering, "your alleged Berkshires came mighty near wrecking Judge Belknap's new machine. Better keep them off the public highway, or you'll have a score to settle with him."

Farmer Hemingway strode up to the rear of the automobile.

"My hogs were safe on these roads long before you new-fangled road-hogs came," he cried, his voice shrill with real anger now. "And here they stay. And if I did wreck Belknap's machine, and he could prove it, I reckon I could pay the damage a dern sight quicker than you can pay for them hogs."

Tom's smile vanished. It was odiously different — this thing of not being able to pay — the way Hemingway put it. The farmer saw he had scored. He went on:

"You pay for them Berkshires! Haw! Haw! I'd be an old man waitin'." He leered maliciously at Jane, who had resumed her seat, turning her back to him. "I guess she don't pay you much in the way of salary for drivin' this machine around, and I never heard that you could do anything else."

Tom Wilson was on the ground before Hemingway had fairly finished, his fists clenched, his face scarlet. He was furious, not so much at what Hemingway had said, as at the evil suggestion of the man's tone and manner. Besides, he had just been humiliated before Jane, and it was no less a pleasure than a duty to pummel the detractor.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded hotly.

"Oh, nothin', nothin'," stammered Farmer Hemingway, backing away before the athletic youngster. "I never expected you to pay for them hogs. No, sir-ee. I expect Judge Belknap to pay. He's always paid before and he'll pay again or I'll have the law on him. You tell him for me I'll be around this afternoon to collect."

Tom controlled himself with an effort.

"You manage your own collections, and keep a civil tongue in your head while you're about it," he said shortly, and climbed back into his seat.

The girl had heard everything in silence. She hadn't even turned her head when Tom leaped from the car.

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The car started, gathered speed, disappeared around the next curve, leaving Farmer Hemingway to gather up his dead and curse the survivors, and Tom, and the luck which had deprived him of half the expected profits of his coup.

CHAPTER II

STEEPLES AND SKY-SCRAPERS

TOM WILSON drove on toward the village at a moderated speed.

"Poor little black things," said the girl presently. "Do you know, I more than half believe Hemingway drove those pigs out into the road on purpose?"

The youth did not reply. For the first time in his two and twenty years, Tom was submitting himself to the ordeal of five consecutive minutes of hard thinking. Like Jane, he had considerably more than a vague suspicion of the trick Hemingway had played. The farmer, in his anger, had let slip more than he intended. Besides, this would be by no means his first successful assault on Judge Belknap's pocketbook. Several days before, certain fancy-priced chickens had appeared, as if by magic, near that same barnyard gate. The Judge had paid the bill in a manner somewhat emotional. "And it must be the last," was his ultimatum.

But it was an unprecedented sense of his own impecuniosity, rather than the impending impoverishment of Judge Belknap's purse and temper, that

now sat heavy on Tom Wilson's soul. The feeling of dependence had never been a pleasant one. To-day it rankled. Farmer Hemingway's scornful "Haw! Haw!" was still tingling in his ears. To be held fair game by Hemingway! Tom's blue eyes clouded with anger at the humiliating recollection.

And Jane! Tom dimly remembered that she had made some remark, to which, in his pre-occupation, he had failed to reply. What must she be thinking? He had an uncomfortable feeling that she was looking him over with those calm, contemplative eyes of hers. He hazarded a swift side-long glance. Jane was discreetly absorbed in the familiar scenery ahead, on the lookout, maybe, for more irruptions of pigs or chickens.

Tom looked ahead too, and beheld Fairview, dozing in the morning sun — a village where nothing happened. He took cognizance of its dozen steeples and groaned in spirit.

Now Fairview, to the unprejudiced eye, was, and is, a prepossessing village enough, one that lived up to the promise of its name. With its one wide business thoroughfare, where the life of the village centered; with its quiet, shaded residence streets, all laid out at decent right angles and lined with pretty cottages and green lawns and beds of flowers; with its ornate library (Judge Belknap's gift), its combination town hall and opera house, and its substantial schoolhouse — not forgetting the dozen

steeple and their attached churches — Fairview was, and is, as charming a village as the hearts of its five thousand villagers could desire.

But Tom Wilson was not a villager at heart. Fairview did not count for much in his dreams of the future. It was a good enough place to be born in, or, perchance, to bring up one's mother in. But it was, beyond dispute, a humdrum, unenterprising place; no place at all to carve one's fortune out of. So Tom had never tried. It had been his ambition to go to New York and do "something big," where big things were a part of the day's work; where, to see a steeple, one must climb on top of a skyscraper and look down, and then around. Fairview presented no opportunity to a man of parts. Tom panted for a larger arena.

As he grasped the steering wheel in his strong, bare hands, Tom could feel under his arm a letter, which crackled in his inside pocket. It had come yesterday from an old friend of his father's, Dick Kennedy, now Richard B. Kennedy, general passenger agent of one of the great trunk railroads stretching from New York half way across the continent. Dick Kennedy had been a Fairview boy. To Richard B. Kennedy, G. P. A., Tom had written ten days before, asking for a place in his office. To his father's old friend he had confided his visions of a metropolitan career and offered first chance to finance it in its launching.

The reply had been kindly, even encouraging in tone, but disappointing in its figures. Tom had quickly decided that the cheap clerkship it offered was hardly worth considering. When the time came to go to New York, he would sooner take his chances. He hadn't even mentioned the letter to his mother. Tom did not remember his father. If he had been alive, Tom would have liked to talk it over with him, for the letter had been rather puzzling. Now he wondered what Jane would think about a metropolitan début at \$15 a week.

That young person suddenly woke out of a reverie of her own, and said:

"Tom. Please drive to the house. I must get a book and return it to Bessie Caldwell, at once."

"All right," replied Tom. "Bessie Caldwell shall have her book as soon as gasoline can fetch it."

"Guess I'd better speak to mother about Kennedy," he said to himself, and so put the whole affair comfortably out of mind. He knew his mother would never willingly consent to his going to New York.

He threw open the throttle. "Easy," said Jane, as they raced into Main street, "we've killed enough animals for one morning. Beware the dog."

The dog dodged and Tom chuckled, his serious mood vanished. "I'd like to be around when

Hemingway calls on your father this afternoon," he said. "I believe that was all a game of Hemingway's, and the Judge is likely to lay down the law to him. It would be worth hearing."

"Yes, and we may both be put on the witness stand," said Jane, in tones of reproach. "Better not be too eager about it," she warned him.

Tom smiled at her cheerfully.

Now Tom, even in his moments of humiliation, was not a figure to inspire austere and unforgiving sentiments in the breast of any maiden still in her 'teens, let alone Jane Belknap. Humiliation, be it ever so cruel, does not instantly mar a fine profile, and Tom's profile was of a sort that any driver — his eyes on the road, his lady at his side — might use to his advantage. Five minutes of self-abasement, be it ever so bitter, does not materially impair the hue and texture of fair, wavy hair, or mottle a summer's coat of healthy tan. With such was Tom endowed.

But Tom's smile was his best asset. It was sunny, appealing, irresistible. When he turned it on Jane, she melted, and gave it back to him.

"Never mind, Tom," she said. "It wasn't really your fault. It was only your clever driving that saved the machine, and maybe me, too, and father shall know it. I guess he'll save his breath for Hemingway."

And they drove up to the Hemingway mansion

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— it was the only dwelling in Fairview that fulfilled the Fairview definition of a mansion — merry over the prospective discomfiture of Farmer Hemingway.

CHAPTER III

THE JUDGE HAS A BAD COLD

AT about the time Tom Wilson was holding bitter communion with himself out on the Fairview road, Judge Belknap, alone in his house, was exercising some neglected brain cells on his own account, and finding the effort more interesting than agreeable.

"Confound that doctor," he growled. "Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut?"

The Judge had been kept in the house for a day or two by a severe summer cold. He was bearing his confinement impatiently, and Dr. Downing, when he called that morning, had thought it advisable to admonish him.

"Your illness is nothing to be alarmed about now," said the physician in a tone that suggested that it might, in good time, become very alarming indeed. "It is a simple indisposition, very simple, indeed; but, if neglected"—he held up a warning hand—"I say, if neglected, it may result in serious complications." He took up his hat to go. "Very serious, indeed," he added, and went.

The Judge was guilty of no neglect, but complications resulted, just the same, and they proved sur-

prisingly contagious, which Dr. Downing with all his science could never have prognosticated. They involved several persons more seriously than the Judge, who dutifully took advice, and came off rather easily. Tom Wilson, who never took advice, was hit hardest.

For it was his doctor's words that had set the Judge thinking, and a process of introspection started by one's physician is likely to lead a man to take stock of things that he usually shoves away back in his head. The Judge was fifty-five years old, a robust, tireless man still, but still fifty-five. And he had to admit to himself that he was feeling pretty mean that day. It was the first time in his busy life that the passing of the years had occurred to him as a matter of supreme personal interest.

It was also the first time, he reflected, that he had felt it necessary to obey a physician's injunctions and stay away from his office.

At thought of his neglected business, the Judge rose impatiently from his easy chair. It seemed to him that one of his knees creaked a bit and that his back was a trifle stiffer than he remembered it. He sat down again, rather slowly and dismally, and hated the doctor.

He let his glance wander slowly about the familiar living room. The forenoon sun poured warm through the three French windows that opened upon the front veranda, but the apartment seemed op-

pressively chill and cheerless. His eye came to rest on a mirror, which hung in the shadow near the door.

It was years since the Judge had consulted a mirror except razor in hand. Hardly since his fancy-scarf and boutonniere days, had he felt the temptation to appraise his personal appearance. Now he hesitated, frowning to himself. He looked about. No one was near.

The glass had been hung with a forward tilt, to suit the convenience of one of smaller stature than the Judge. He put out his hand to flatten it against the wall. The loud Honk-Honk of an automobile cut short a promising inspection, and he turned away quickly with a guilty grin. What would Jane have said if she had caught him in that pose before her mirror?

The Judge knew that that Honk heralded Jane's approach. In fact the village of Fairview boasted of only one automobile, and Judge Belknap, Fairview's leading citizen, was its envied owner.

The automobile came to a sudden halt, which made the driveway pebbles fly, and Judge Belknap, at the window, saw Jane spring lightly down from where she sat beside Tom Wilson. She waved to her father, who was smiling now over his escape, and ran into the house. She was out again in a minute, a book under her arm, and in less than an-

other, had disappeared down Main street in a cloud of dust.

The Judge sat down again, more comfortably. If anything did happen to him — a remote contingency, at worst — his daughter would be well provided for. Jane would be ten times over the richest girl in Fairview, as well as ten times the prettiest. He felt pleased to remember that he had made his will long ago, purely in the way of business. Making one's will on a physician's tip is a depressing ceremony, always. He had assisted at several such, as an attorney.

"The richest girl and the prettiest." He said it aloud, almost boastfully, then added, somewhat dubiously: "And the most sensible."

Now the Judge no more doubted Jane's good sense than the solidity of his investments, which should be hers. But it had occurred to him, even as he boasted, that, while he was ripening at fifty-five Jane had blossomed at nineteen. She was no longer a child, but an altogether charming young woman, of marriageable age, the catch of the country — and motherless.

The Judge pondered. Yes, Jane had good sense, plenty of it. But she had one alarming weakness, — Tom Wilson.

Jane seemed to be very fond of young Wilson, and he of her. They were constantly in each other's company, had, indeed, been inseparable

since first they had been able to toddle toward each other. And now Tom was old enough to have voted once or twice and he was still toddling. That's just what Tom was, a toddler, an irresponsible kid. Why, he'd never earned a dollar in his life, or wanted to. It was high time he began.

The Judge began to pace the room, his own discomfort forgotten in his anxiety for his daughter. There was no room for reasonable doubt. Jane certainly was very fond of Tom. In fact the two of them probably looked upon their affair as a settled thing. Jane had never said so, but it was the only fair inference. If only her mother were alive! He must manage it somehow himself. He sat down again to think it over.

After all, what insuperable objection was there to Tom Wilson?

Tom had a good head on him. True he never used it, but then Satan had never found any particular mischief for his idle brains to do. His character was unexceptionable. There wasn't a youth in Fairview who would go farther than Tom, or half so far, if only Tom would settle down and get busy.

And then, the boy had grown up fatherless. He had never had a fair chance. Perhaps Belknap himself might fairly be held responsible for that. The Judge could not forget that Jim Wilson, dying, had left him the boy "to make a man of him."

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His word to Jim had not been kept. He must redeem it now, for Tom's sake, as well as Jane's.

The Honk of the returning automobile made him start to his feet. Judge Belknap, his mind once made up, was not a man to dally. He would take the boy in hand at once. He strode to the open window.

"Tom," he called. "I want to see you."

Tom and Jane eyed each other uneasily.

"Geel" said Tom, under his breath. "Hemingway's beat us to it. Guess he must have 'phoned."

CHAPTER IV

FIVE DOLLARS A WEEK

TOM entered steeled for the expected fray. He found Belknap seated at his table, examining papers. Unconsciously, perhaps, the Judge had assumed his best professional manner for the interview. The youth, unfortunately, mistook it for the pose of righteous but suppressed wrath. Unconsciously also, perhaps, he played for time.

He tossed his cap and automobile goggles into a chair by the door, nodded a defiantly cheerful good morning, and paused before the mirror to smooth his ruffled hair. He found it necessary to adjust his neat blue four-in-hand, too. Then he tilted back the mirror, stood at arm's length and frankly admired the general effect.

The Judge laid his letter down and sat waiting with a sour smile. Tom deposited himself in the chair across the table, crossed his legs and said, with studied politeness:

"I'm sorry to see that you're no better to-day, Judge. What can I do for you?"

The sufferer looked at him hard. "Not much," he rasped. And added, after a moment's consideration of the invidious accent on Tom's "you":

"Not much for me and not much for anybody else."

Then the Judge was sorry, and tried to soften the glare which had accompanied the words. Poor Tom, taken aback, began to apologize, though ignorant of just how he had offended.

"I only wanted to help, Judge Belknap," he stammered. "You see, when a man of your age gets knocked out in this way, there are lots of things he can't look after himself, and, if I can be of any —" he was going to say "any assistance," but stopped in time. He received a vague impression that, by so doing, he had just dodged an explosion.

The Judge's temper had not been sweetened any by his short term of adversity, and Tom had put his blundering finger on the raw. The Judge spoke, very slowly, for fear of speaking too fast.

"I shall not require your assistance," he said, "but I thank you just the same." Then dryly: "In fact your kindness makes my own duty easier. I sent for you, not to ask assistance, but to offer it."

Tom sprang to his feet. "Why, what's the matter with me?" he asked, perplexed.

The Judge told him. Tom had given the lawyer the exact opening he needed, and Belknap wasted no time in choosing soft and pleasing terms with which to picture Tom's wasted past, his useless present, and his unprofitable future.

The boy took it all in good part, at least without

protest. He sat there in a maze. "Now just what is my venerable friend driving at?" he asked himself. Of course, what that infernal farmer had said—but this was different. He had never heard the Judge talk with such lack of restraint. Perhaps his illness had made him a bit light-headed.

He listened attentively and with a growing look of concern that quite misled Belknap. The Judge relented. "Come, the fellow has some sense after all," he thought. "I should have taken him in hand before," and, much mollified, passed from diagnosis to prescription.

It was perhaps due to the Judge's lack of sympathetic imagination, that he now proceeded to fill Tom full of vain and fanciful hope. He began by saying, in a fatherly way, how important it was for every young man to choose the right profession or business. He dilated, almost with enthusiasm on the pleasure and profits of the law—from the lawyer's point of vantage—taking, as an attractive example his own highly successful career in Fairview. As if to make amends for his late excoriation of Tom, he was pleased to assure that young man of the good opinion he held of his natural abilities. He was quite sure Tom would make a success of the law, if only he would apply himself to the task.

Tom began to have an inkling. It was with a

smile of complacency that he permitted the Judge to continue, without interruption:

"Now, I want you to come into my office. I will teach you all I know about the law. It will be three years before you can take your final examinations, but it would take three years to enter any profession anywhere, and, if I do say it"—here the Judge expanded his chest after the manner peculiar to self-conscious affluence—"if I do say it, there isn't a law student in Western New York who mightn't envy you the place that will be yours in my office."

Generous words, indeed! At last it dawned fully on Tom just what the Judge had been "driving at." How could he have been so obtuse? The Judge was getting along in years. What he most needed was a hustling, young partner, of course—a man who could relieve his aging shoulders of the burden of detail incident to his ever-increasing practice. Preferably a young man, of good natural abilities, whom he could train to meet the precise needs of the situation, who could grow up with the business.

Tom could easily see why the mantle was to fall upon him. He was hampered by no previous experience. He had nothing to unlearn. The Judge had stated that explicitly, almost brutally by way of leading up to his proposal.

But could he accept the offer? Could he afford to accept it? Tom did some rapid thinking while

the Judge dallied over details. It was a liberal offer, truly, but then—it was Fairview against New York. Tom has seen visions, and a country law practice held out few allurements to him.

But again, there was Jane. In whatever principality of the air Tom had built his castles, there had never been any mistress for them but Jane. Perhaps his patron had Jane in mind too, as he discoursed of office hours and duties, taking Tom's acceptance quite for granted. Certainly the Judge's partnership plan would fit well into the general scheme. It would please mother, too. He would never be able to reconcile her to the New York idea.

And so, with a sigh of relinquishment, Tom thrust aside his vision of metropolitan glories, abandoned his dream of "something big," and, as the Judge's monologue seemed to be nearing the end, gave ear to his final words with the austere mien of one who sacrifices himself for the common good.

And this is what he heard:

"Well then, everything is well understood, and no more time need be wasted. Let me see, this is Friday. Report at the office next Monday morning at eight o'clock, ready to pitch in. You will get five dollars a week."

"Five dollars a week!"

Tom sat up in his chair with a jerk and echoed the offer in tones of agonized surprise. Then, by

way of reply, he gasped. Words — adequate words — would not come. For the first time in his life, Tom's effervescent vocabulary failed him. He stared across the table with an expression of utter bewilderment, which sat so ludicrously on his frank, boyish face, that, had Judge Belknap so much as half-noticed it, his own unsmiling countenance must have relaxed in sympathy.

But the Judge was intent, or seemed to be, on a document he had taken from a drawer in the table, and both gasp and stare went for naught. If he did notice them, they only hardened him in his determination to put the boy through the severe "course of sprouts," which, he was sure, was the first thing Tom needed. It would be a fine thing for this spoiled youngster to learn just what he was worth in the world of dollars and cents.

The matter-of-fact lawyer was far from suspecting that, with four words, he had degraded a potential partner to the rank of an office boy. If he could have read Tom's inmost mind, it wouldn't have made any difference. He was quite satisfied that he was doing the right thing, and the fact that his own ultimate hopes of Tom were not far out of line with Tom's too-previous apprehension of them, wouldn't have mattered. Tom must first show that he had the stuff in him. That Tom might refuse his offer was a possibility that never entered his head.

So the Judge dropped that end of the business as settled. Before Tom could recover breath or speech, he went on, rapping the table with the folded paper to give due emphasis to his words.

"This," he said, "is a copy of your father's will, of which I have the honor to be sole executor. Now that you are about to try making your own way in the world, it is necessary that you know exactly where you stand. Your father and I —"

Tom had ceased to listen. He knew all he cared to know about that will, or thought he did. Everybody in Fairview knew that his father and Belknap had been bosom friends. Bah! That only made Belknap's conduct all the more miserable.

"Five dollars a week." The words buzzed in his head like four flies in a bottle. He could hear nothing else.

The Judge went on explaining. Tom, deaf and dumb with rage, paid no heed. The more he thought the madder he got. "Five dollars a week!" Why, the colored boy that drove Mad-dox's grocery wagon got six. Judge Belknap himself paid ten to his carrot-headed secretary-stenographer, Hez Jenks. Suddenly Tom found his tongue. He jumped to his feet to tell this cheap village magnate just what he thought of him and Fairview.

He opened his mouth, stopped, sputtered. Providence, in the form of a pretty girl, had intervened

to save the unsuspecting Judge from a disagreeable surprise. It was Jane, who, anxious for her favorite chauffeur, had sauntered down the piazza and stopped in front of the open window just in time to halt Tom's blistering words between tongue and lip. She silently waved her veil, and passed on. Her father's back was turned to the window, and he neither saw nor heard.

The Judge gazed up inquiringly at Tom's hanging jaw. Tom sputtered again. He could cheerfully have annihilated Hiram Belknap on the spot, but he couldn't destroy Jane Belknap's father. His jaw trembled under the Judge's keen scrutiny. Something had to be said. The words came stammeringly:

"Five dollars a week?"

He was ready to burst with chagrin, but he could think of nothing else. And, since his tone this time was weakly interrogative, the Judge deigned to reply.

"I began on less," he said. "So did your father," he added slowly, looking at Tom.

Tom had no reply to that. He knew that Hiram Belknap treasured his friend's memory and never spoke of him without deep feeling, and he felt that his present reference was not an idle one. He remembered, too, that Belknap had been his mother's trusted friend and adviser, and that she would be deeply grieved if her son affronted him.

Nevertheless his own position must be made perfectly clear. As he hesitated, the Judge came to his aid.

"Well, then, we shall regard the matter as settled," he said.

Tom's muscles stiffened. He threw back his head. "No," he ejaculated.

His throat was dry. He paused. The Judge stared, incredulous.

"I can't afford to be a piker," Tom said.

It was the Judge's turn to be stunned into silence. He looked at Tom a full half-minute. Then he broke into a contemptuous laugh.

"You don't think the job worthy of your abilities?" he asked. "May I inquire if you have anything better in view?"

The Judge's tone was bitterly sarcastic. Tom thought of the letter in his pocket, but did not trust himself to reply. The Judge arose.

"You mean you do not care to accept my offer. Very well, I do not wish to force it on you. I shall be glad to learn that you have succeeded elsewhere. From what I have told you of the condition of your father's estate, you must realize that it is up to you to make good, and soon. There is another thing, too, which your course in this matter makes it necessary to say. I do not wish to be hard on you, but, until you do make good, you cannot expect—" he

broke off awkwardly as Jane appeared again at the window, a letter in her hand.

"Can't Tom come now?" she asked. "We just have time to drive down to the post-office before the mail goes out."

"We will speak of it again," said the Judge to Tom.

Tom left the room in troubled silence. He had missed what Judge Belknap had said about the estate. And he had a shrewd notion of what it was the Judge had reserved for future discussion.

The Judge sank wearily into his chair. He heard Tom grunting as he wrestled with the crank of the automobile, and Jane gleefully mocking him. Then, at some remark of Tom's, which he did not catch, both voices rose in laughter as the machine glided away. To the Judge, with their recent interview in mind, the remark and the laugh came as fresh proofs of Tom's flippant irresponsibility.

"I'm afraid Jim's son isn't going to make good very soon," he said.

CHAPTER V

THE JUDGE SIDE-STEPS

JANE BELKNAP fully merited her father's estimate of her as a sensible girl. Jane was as sensible as she was sweet and pretty, and no reasonable person could ask more. Of medium height and trim, full-modelled figure, her tanned cheeks and wholesome face told of floor life and abounding health. Her hair was dark brown, brushed smoothly back over a shapely head, except where it clustered in little, rebellious curls about her white forehead. Thick, curling lashes shaded eyes so soft and brown that, from her childhood, her father had never been able to withstand their coaxing. Jane's eyes were her chief charm, and demure Jane knew it.

But it was the quality of Jane's chin, rather than of her eyes, that disconcerted the Judge as he faced her at the luncheon table, two hours after his interrupted interview with Tom. Gentle and affectionate as she was, Jane had a self-reliant habit of doing her own thinking. It was this self-same trait that had earned her father's golden opinion of her good sense, but it might prove an embarrassing factor in the present situation.

Judge Belknap's jaw was of the squarish, granite type. Jane's chin was rounded and softly feminine, but a connoisseur in physiognomic values might have noted that it was set as firmly as the Judge's own. Just at present she was employing it exclusively on the viands before her, her silence leaving it to be inferred that she was doing a heap of thinking.

The Judge wavered. He had fully made up his mind to send for Tom that afternoon and have it out with him. He was quite certain of what he wanted to say to Tom. He wasn't quite so sure how Jane would take it.

It was Hezekiah Jenks, the Judge's lanky secretary, who unwittingly brought things to a crisis. Dr. Downing had allowed Belknap to transact at home such urgent business as was necessary "to keep him from worrying himself to death while he was getting well." Among the letters brought to him from his office after luncheon, the Judge found one addressed in the angular hand-writing of Hez Jenks.

Mildly wondering what Hez could have on his mind that required this formal means of expression, the Judge opened the letter. It began with humble protestations of zeal and devotion to the Judge's interests; dwelt at length on the writer's industry, faithfulness and length of service. "He wants more money and picks a time I can't well do

without him to ask it," thought the Judge, and frowned impatiently as he turned the page. Then a sudden, sulphuric syllable escaped him. In courtly terms Hez Jenks had begged permission to pay his addresses to the Judge's daughter.

Judge Belknap's first thought was to send for his impudent factotum and indulge himself in the pleasure of kicking him out of the house. Better still, send for Tom too, and kill both birds with one stone. No, that wouldn't do. Somehow Hez's pretensions provoked him as Tom's did not. The idea of this gawky, uncouth piece of office equipment's aspiring to the possession of dainty, bewitching Jane, was offensive to the last degree.

Yet Hez's letter told the truth, as far as it went. Hez was faithful, zealous, industrious — all the admirable things that Tom Wilson most emphatically was not. Hez would make good in Fairview. But for a son-in-law! Never!

Still the Judge thought it best to ignore his impudence for the present. Perhaps it might even be turned to advantage in the case of Jane and Tom. He would temporize, choose the easy line of attack. Meantime he decided to take counsel with Tom's mother. He wrote her a note, inviting her to take tea with him at five o'clock that afternoon and asking her not mention it to Tom.

When Hez Jenks arrived shortly before that hour for the brief afternoon business session that

Dr. Downing sanctioned, he found the Judge in no agreeable mood. Hez, who studied his employer more diligently than his law-books, seated himself silently in the chair Tom had found so uncomfortable that morning. The Judge began dictating replies to several letters.

The master eyed the man with eyes of disfavor as Hez bent his head over the pad of paper he held on his knee. Hez had yellow hair, too, but it was of a faded straw color, and fell lank across a narrow forehead, which sloped straight back from a beak-like nose. He had blue eyes, faded too, with sparse lashes, which could not conceal their shifty alertness, so unlike Tom's friendly, candid gaze. Hez's desirable qualities seemed to be strictly limited to the undeniable ones catalogued in his letter.

"That will be all," snapped the Judge, as he laid down the last letter.

"Yes, sir," said Hez meekly, but he lingered a moment half-expectantly before he rose.

"Where's Jane?" asked the Judge abruptly. He had not intended to mention her. It was no part of Hez's business to know where Jane was. Hez was too artful to take the accidental opening.

"I haven't seen her since noon, sir," he said. "I think she went out with Tom Wilson in the automobile."

The Judge was grateful for an opportunity to vent his spleen on some legitimate object of wrath.

"That automobile was a mistake," he said testily, "a frightful extravagance. I'm sorry that I ever bought it."

"Guess the town would miss it if you gave it up," said Hez. "It's the only one we've got."

"It does give us a little tone," said the Judge, appeased by the sly tribute to the only one's owner. "That's why I bought it. But I didn't count on the reckless slaughter of animals involved in running it. Upon my soul, we've killed enough chickens and pigs with it to keep the town in fresh meat for a year."

"Nobody kicks about that so long as you pay for them," replied Hez, who knew Tom had officiated at most of the killings.

The Judge eyed him with irritation. "I don't intend to pay for them much longer," he said. "If this town wants an automobile, it will have to stand for the accidents. Here," he added, handing Hez a bundle of papers he had signed, "take these back with you to the office. Tell everybody that calls that I won't be down till Monday. If it's anything that can't wait, send them over to me here. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." Hez walked slowly towards the door, as if he hesitated about speaking further in face of this dismissal. He stopped half way, turned and said awkwardly:

"'Scuse me, Judge Belknap, but have you

thought any on what I wrote you about — about Jane? ”

The Judge was taken unawares. “No,” he said at last. “I do not wish to influence her in any way.” He thought of Tom and added, almost with a smile: “At least, I don’t want to be compelled to do so.”

“But — you don’t object to me,” persisted Hez.

“Why should I?” asked the Judge. “You are faithful, energetic, ambitious. You’ll make your mark some day. No, if Jane wants it that way, by all means don’t let me stand in the way.”

There was something in the Judge’s reference to Jane’s wishes that Hez didn’t quite like, but he had gained his chance. It would be his own fault if he failed to profit by it. Before the Judge could say more, he replied:

“Thank you, sir. I can come back and see her a little later?”

The Judge gave him a hard look. For a moment he was sore tempted. A vision of Hez, catapulting off the toe of his boot, danced before his eyes. Sarah, the neat housemaid, entered. “Mrs. Wilson, sir,” she announced. “Any time after you’re through your work,” said the Judge to Hez. To Sarah: “Show her in.” He rose quickly and went towards the door.

“Come in, come right in, Mrs. Wilson,” he cried warmly.

A sweet-faced, motherly-looking woman of forty-five stood in the door and looked diffidently from the Judge to Hez and back again. Her face expressed deep concern. Judge Belknap hastened to her, and said, as he grasped her hand:

"I hope I haven't put you to any trouble. I would have come over to see you, but I am not allowed to leave the house."

"I'm sorry to hear you're not well," said Tom's mother.

"Oh, nothing serious," replied the Judge, with an effort at cheerfulness. "Just a cold, but at my time of life, I can't afford to be going against the doctor's advice. You'd like some tea. Jane isn't here, but I'll have Sarah bring it."

He crossed the wide room to press a button. Hez had lingered, uninvited. The hint of distress in Mrs. Wilson's manner, the Judge's elaborate cordiality, had not escaped his alert senses. He approached Mrs. Wilson. She turned to him with a start.

"Oh, how are you, Hezekiah?" she asked. "You're getting so big I didn't know you. Are your folks all well?"

"Yes, thanks. All except dad. His back has gone out on him again, but otherwise he's all right."

"Remember me to your mother, won't you?" said Mrs. Wilson, as Hez labored to frame a question.

"Yes, thanks, I will," said Hez. The Judge came towards them with a frown of annoyance. "I've got to go to the office now," Hez added, and made for the door.

Left alone with his guest, the Judge seemed embarrassed. "Sit down, Mrs. Wilson," he said. "No, this chair, it's more comfortable." An awkward pause was broken by Sarah's entrance. It was Mrs. Wilson who ordered the tea.

The Judge bustled across the room for a small tea table, which he placed at Mrs. Wilson's arm. "It's a great pleasure to see you again," he said. He drew up a chair across the table. "We don't see you nearly often enough these days," he complained.

"I'm sure it isn't my fault," said Mrs. Wilson gently.

He hastened to reassure her. "It's the fault of conditions. We busy men, you know, Mrs. Wilson," he added.

Another pause. "It must be very gratifying to have all the railroad's business to look after," ventured Mrs. Wilson.

Few railroad lawyers care to take their business home with them.

"Every little helps," replied the Judge, nonchalantly. Then, in tones he strove to make impressive: "That's been my motto for a good many years. Nothing so small but what it's worth at-

tending to. I think that accounts for what little success I've had."

Mrs. Wilson did not get the meaning the Judge intended. Tom had told her nothing of his offer. But she was duly impressed.

"You've had more than a little success, Judge Belknap," she protested. "Aren't you the only man in Fairview known outside of it? Haven't we watched you climb from a dingy little law practice to the pinnacle of public office? You've been very successful, indeed."

"It's very kind of you to say so," responded the Judge. The pinnacle referred to had been an ad interim appointment as county judge, whence his title, but Mrs. Wilson's earnestness was pleasingly sincere.

"It's quite a change from the old days," she continued, in a lower voice, "although I suppose I ought not to mention them now."

"Why not?" asked the Judge, with bluff heartiness. "Those days are always dear to us for their associations."

"When I think of the time when you and Jim —" Mrs. Wilson faltered.

"Tut, tut," said the Judge. "Why think of that now? You have your health, your son." He felt that he had approached his subject clumsily. Sarah entered with the tea things. He welcomed the diversion.

"I'll have to ask you to pour, Mrs. Wilson," he said. "It's not quite in my line." Sarah placed the tray and was dismissed. Mrs. Wilson poured. The Judge squared around to face her. He began, half to Mrs. Wilson, half to himself.

"Now then," he said.

Mrs. Wilson looked up. She had quite recovered her composure.

"I had supposed that you wished to see me about —"

"About Tom." The Judge completed the sentence for her. "I have had a talk with him."

Tom's mother looked worried. "What has he done now?"

"He has disappointed me," said Belknap gravely.

Tom's mother was in distress. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said.

The Judge set his cup down with nice exactness in the center of its saucer.

"Mrs. Wilson," he said slowly, "I've always been taught that a man should earn his own bread; that a humble beginning was the proper road to success; at any rate, that a modest start was nothing to be ashamed of. Such a start I offered to your son. I am sorry to say that your son does not agree with me."

"You say — you mean he refused the position," faltered Mrs. Wilson.

"Wouldn't even entertain it," said the Judge.

"Of course," he added, touched by Mrs. Wilson's distress, "the salary I offered him was small. But it was meant only as a beginning and I agreed to take him into my office and teach him the law, all I know of it at least. He couldn't see it."

"What did he say?" asked Tom's mother.

The Judge smiled a sour smile. "That he didn't want to be a piker," he replied.

"What did he mean by that?" The word was new to her.

Judge Belknap was in no mood to elucidate. He waved the offensive term away with his napkin.

"Oh, I presume he meant the job wasn't good enough for him," he said indifferently. Mrs. Wilson turned her face aside. She was trying to keep back the tears. The Judge changed his tone, but not his programme.

"Of course you understand how I am placed," he went on, half-apologetically. "I'd do anything in the world for Jim's son, but I can't afford to neglect my own interests." He paused. There was no reply. "You see, there's Jane."

Mrs. Wilson's hands fluttered, but she was silent. He went on relentlessly:

"I believe they are very fond of each other. They probably consider themselves as good as engaged. But I'm sorry to say that the boy isn't what I thought him. My daughter's husband must not be ashamed to work."

It was out now, and the Judge rose from his

chair with an air of finality. Mrs. Wilson's eyes were tracing the pattern of the Judge's carpet.

"Judge Belknap," she asked timidly, "what do you think IS the matter with Tom?"

The Judge was vastly relieved. He had feared recrimination, tears, a possible scene. This was a vindication of his attitude. He cou'd afford to be generous with advice.

"Mrs. Wilson," he asked, "you won't mind if I speak frankly?"

"I want you to be frank," she said.

"You've kept Tom too close to your apron strings." He put out his hand quickly as Mrs. Wilson attempted to rise. "Oh, I know what you are going to say. Your only child, can't do without him — a mother's love. I understand exactly how you feel. It's natural enough, but, in Tom's case, it's been a mistake. You should have made him realize that you were dependent on the little his father left you. Then he might have made a stab at something. As it is, he has been thinking that you had nothing to worry about — that he could afford to wait for something big to happen — something big. That's his trouble. He wants the harvest without the bother of planting the seed."

"He wants to go to New York," said Mrs. Wilson weakly. The Judge's arraignment had been crushing. Her conscience smote her. Perhaps she hadn't considered Tom.

"Let him go," said the Judge. "Let him go."

"There's nothing like a big city for taking the conceit out of a youngster."

"I'm afraid I couldn't do without him," she objected feebly.

"Have you tried?"

"Once, when he went to visit at Cousin Mary's at Buffalo." She mustered a wan, little smile. "It was very lonesome."

"Of course it was," rejoined the Judge. "That's the very thing I mean. He's become a habit with you. But you'd get over it, just the same as any other habit. Besides, it isn't fair to the boy, if he wants to go. If there is anything in him, give it a chance to come out."

"I'll think about it a little longer," said Tom's mother, doubtfully.

"Just as you like," conceded the Judge. "I only wanted you to understand my attitude in this matter, that is, where my girl is concerned."

"Have you spoken to Jane about it?" asked Mrs. Wilson.

"Well, no," the Judge confessed, "at least, not so frankly as I have with you." He wasn't fooling Mrs. Wilson, and he knew it. "I have every confidence in her discretion," he added, rather lamely.

At that moment the street door was thrown open, and the object of her father's confidence entered the room and bore down upon Mrs. Wilson with a rush.

CHAPTER VI

"KEEP OFF THE GRASS"

"COME on in Tom," called Jane over her shoulder, as she grasped Mrs. Wilson's hands affectionately. "Here's the runaway, in here."

Mrs. Wilson's hands trembled in the girl's warm clasp. Her eyes turned apprehensively towards the door. Jane chattered away cheerfully.

"Well, now, what do you think of this?" she cried. "We've searched the cottage. We've been looking everywhere for you," with mock severity to Mrs. Wilson. "Nobody seemed to know where you were. And here you've been visiting us all the time. Why—"

Jane's voice died away on the top note of a rising inflection. There was something amiss. She took a swift inventory. Her father stood aloof. Mrs. Wilson was pale; her lips were trembling. With hardly a break, Jane rattled on:

"Why, how cold your hands are! You are not feeling well. You shouldn't have walked over from the cottage; it's too far. Why, you have hardly tasted your tea. You should have let me know you

were coming. You know I can make tea just the way you like it."

"I suppose I should have left word where I was going, but —" Mrs. Wilson fibbed falteringly — "but I didn't think, I — that is, I didn't expect to be gone long."

Tom, who had lingered outside to look to his gasoline, entered while his mother was stumbling over her excuses. He paused at the door, and, as he listened, a look of comprehension and anger wiped from his face the smile with which he had hastened to greet her. There was a silence as he walked to her side and placed his hand on the back of her chair, his eyes fixed all the while on Belknap's expressionless face.

"This looks suspicious to me," he said, in a voice so unlike his usual careless tones, that his mother started up nervously. He turned to her. "What has Judge Belknap been saying to you?" he demanded. She winced, and was silent.

The Judge cleared his throat. "We've been discussing you," he said.

Tom placed his arm caressingly about his mother's shoulders.

"You can't make my mother dislike me," he said belligerently. The little woman smiled up at him reassuringly. She was slightly bewildered rather pleasantly bewildered, at this new aspect of Tom. She couldn't quite understand why Tom thought it

necessary to announce something so obvious in a tone so aggressive.

The Judge eyed the two of them for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not fool enough to try it," he said, and turned away. He caught Jane's questioning eye and bethought himself.

"But I felt it my duty"—he spoke impressively, looking at Tom, but measuring his words for Jane—"I felt it my duty to tell her that I had offered you a position in my office, and that you had refused it."

Tom did not grasp the Judge's purpose, but he had a vague feeling that he was being put on his defense.

"Yes, five dollars a week," he said, with a slight grimace.

Mother, Jane, the Judge, man of humble beginnings, all gazed at him in a crescendo of disapproval.

"Times have changed." He laughed lightly. "The cost of living has gone up."

There was no answering gleam in Jane's brown eyes. His mother looked grieved.

"Product and labor have always been rated according to the law of supply and demand," quoth the Judge, ponderously.

"There doesn't seem to be any law of labor," said Tom. Ja-

"How about that, mother?" he asked, his smile seeking hers.

"I am very sorry you did not accept the Judge's offer, she answered gravely. He turned to Jane.

"What do you know about that?" he demanded.

"Even mother doesn't think me worth more than five dollars a week."

Jane avoided him. Her eyes dwelt sympathetically on Mrs. Wilson. Tom shook himself impatiently, walked to the window and gazed across the lawn with an air of great interest, at a dog-fight out in the street.

"Did you have a pleasant ride?" asked Mrs. Wilson.

"Perfectly bully," said Jane. "The country is as pretty as it can be, with the leaves turning to yellow and gold. And Tom is getting to be a splendid chauffeur."

"Humph!" said the Judge. "Have any accidents?"

"None this afternoon," said Tom over his shoulder. "A bunch of hogs got in our way this morning. I fear some of them didn't live to regret it."

"Whom did they belong to?"

"Hemingway, I think," said Tom. "He acted like it."

"Hemingway!" exclaimed the unfortunate Judge. "Good Lord! He may be down on me

any minute with a bill big enough to raise the mortgage on his farm."

Jane rushed to the rescue. "Don't be angry, Dad," she pleaded. "It wasn't Tom's fault. The pigs ran right out under the wheels, and, if it hadn't been for Tom's good driving, the machine would have been smashed and we might both have been killed."

"But," stormed the Judge, "I've had to pay that man nearly two hundred dollars for animals that I've never seen. It's outrageous. I'm not going to submit to it any longer. I wouldn't care if the machine were smashed."

"If you feel that way about it, you'd better give up automobiling," suggested Tom.

"I will," cried the Judge. "And I'll give the confounded machine to anybody that'll haul it away."

Tom clapped his hands together. "You're on," he said. "The car is mine."

"Why, Tom," said his mother, wonderingly. "What will you do with it?"

Tom was enjoying Belknap's discomfiture. "Ask the Judge, mother," he said. "He'll tell you you shouldn't spoil the first business chance I've ever had. If he'll leave the gasoline in it, I won't even have to haul it away." He turned to the Judge. "I'll take it with me." He made for the door.

"Come along, mother," he called. "I'll drive you home."

The Judge barred his way. "Don't be hasty, young man," he said. "You've forgotten one important essential."

"What's that?" queried Tom, innocently.

"The money to pay for it."

"You said you'd give it away," insisted Tom.

"I'm not quite a fool," retorted the Judge, who was beginning to get red around the ears.

Tom threw up hands, limp with resignation. "Oh, well—" he began.

The telephone in the next room rang briskly. Sarah, the maid, entered.

"Mr. Hemingway wishes to speak to you, sir," she announced.

"I knew it," stormed the Judge. He shook an angry finger at Tom. "What did I tell you?" he demanded. He started towards the 'phone. Jane interposed.

"Let me speak to him, Dad," she said. "Hemingway has no right to leave his gate open as he does. I think he does it on purpose when he sees our car coming, and I mean to tell him so."

They went out together. Sarah whisked up the tea-tray, and followed. Tom turned to his mother.

"Well, mother," said he, "we came near having an automobile in the family. If he hadn't asked me for money, we would have had it."

"Tom," said his mother earnestly, "I wish you wouldn't be so flippant. Can't you see the impression you are making on Judge Belknap?"

"Goodness gracious, mother," said Tom, taking her face between his hands, "what's come over you so suddenly to make you look so serious?"

"I've been talking with Judge Belknap," she explained.

"That's enough to make anybody look serious," laughed Tom.

"He has made me realize that I haven't been fair to you," she continued.

"Absurd," said Tom.

But the Judge's accusation — she felt it to be such — had stirred her deeply. She would spare herself nothing.

"No, it's true, dear," she went on in a voice she strove to hold firm. "I've been very selfish to keep you near me so long. I can see that now. You've grown up without my knowing it. I mustn't stand in your way any longer."

She stopped short, dreading to say what must next be said, fearful lest the tears in her voice should rise and drown her utterance. Tom's anger rose against the man who had caused her distress.

"See here, mother," he said, with affectionate severity, "you mustn't let Judge Belknap worry you about me. He has an idea I'm going to the devil

simply because I won't take the position he offered me."

"But you must start somewhere," she insisted.

"But it would be a mistake not to start right. Now, don't you worry. I'll get something soon, and it will be something worth while — something big."

"Something big!" If Mrs. Wilson had cherished any covert doubt of the wisdom of Belknap's advice, it was driven out by this re-echoed phrase — Tom's own expression, last heard from the Judge's lips, now from Tom's again. She placed her hands on the boy's shoulders. Her voice was quite steady now.

"Tom, dear." She paused. "If you really want to go to New York, I'm willing."

"Mother!" exclaimed Tom. He stepped back, surprised, a trifle hurt.

"I'm willing, dear," she repeated. "In fact, I want you to go."

"You want me to go — to leave you and go to New York!" Tom mistrusted his ears, an injustice to those faithful servants, but then Tom had no notion how heroically the maternal conscience can stretch in an emergency. But he rightly imputed his mother's attitude to the Judge's influence. He met the issue squarely.

"I'm never going to leave you, mother," he said decisively, "so put that idea out of your head."

When the time comes to go to New York, we'll go together." He gave her a kiss to silence her, and a hug to boot. She started to leave the room.

"Not going home?" he said.

"I might as well," she replied hopelessly. Before she could gain the door, it opened, framing the ungainly figure of Hezekiah Jenks, gorgeously arrayed.

Office hours were over, and Hezekiah had wasted no time in availing himself of his new entrée to the Belknap mansion, equivocal though it was. He had lingered only long enough to envelop his long-drawn person in its Sunday best. Tom eyed him critically.

Light brown trousers, with large black checks, flapped about his legs as he strode into the room. His black coat was of the cutaway type, dear to rural dandies. Both garments had been built to meet the demands of the average customer, and they failed to measure up to the extraordinary requirements of Hez's ankles and wrists. The brevity of his trousers served, however, to display a length of pink stocking, which might otherwise have blushed unseen. His satin necktie was pink, too, and a lustrous rhinestone nestled in its folds.

The pink articles and the jewel, be it remarked, were supplementary adornments, variations from Hez's usual sober scheme, such as might invite the delicate fancy of the Belknap heiress. A flower

in Hez's buttonhole owed its station to a similar chance.

Tom marvelled at this irruption of finery. Then an incredible suspicion smote him. Suspicion grew almost to the stature of certainty when Hez, without a word, with hardly more than a glance at Tom or his mother, stalked across the room toward a door, behind which the voice of Jane at the telephone could be distinguished.

"Hello, Hez," Tom hailed. Hez kept on his way.

"Hello, Hez." Tom's tone was peremptory, challenging. Hez halted. He turned to Tom with a grin. It was a disturbing grin, a grin just as significant as Hez dared to make it.

Tom looked him over disdainfully. "How's the messenger boy?" he asked.

"I'd rather be a messenger than not have a job," retorted Hez, his nose in the air.

Tom laughed unpleasantly. "That's one on me," he conceded. "Thought maybe you'd come to see Jane."

"I did," Hez avowed.

Tom took a swift step nearer. "What for?" he demanded.

Hez shrank in his clothes, but stood his ground. "What do you come to see her for?" he asked.

"Look here," blazed Tom, his face thrust almost into Hez's. "There's one thing I want you to un-

derstand — no poaching. Take my tip, and keep off the grass."

Hez backed towards the door, his arm crooked in front of his face. "Judge Belknap has given me permission to walk where I please," he protested, with what spirit he could.

"That's all right," retorted Tom. "Walk where you please, but mind you keep on walking."

"You ain't got no right to object so long as the old man is willing," stammered Hezekiah.

"Perhaps we'd better see about that right now." Tom leaned forward. He made a motion to pull up his sleeves.

"Tom," interposed his mother swiftly, "you mustn't hurt him. Remember where you are."

Tom righted himself. His hands dropped to his sides. Before he could speak the door opened, admitting Belknap, followed by Jane. The Judge glanced keenly at the rivals. Hezekiah he surveyed from stocking to cravat.

"Why, Hez!" he exclaimed wonderingly.

"You said I could come back, sir," Hez hastened to remind him.

Belknap looked uncomfortable for a moment.

"That's all right," he said gruffly. "I'm glad you did. Here! Run over to the office and bring me all those back bills of Hemingway's. All of them, from the time we first got the automobile. Get back as soon as you can. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Hez, and hurried to the door.

Hez was back in his natural rôle of messenger boy. He was a gaudy messenger boy. Tom smiled.

"And, Hez —" called the Judge.

Hez stood motionless, his hat half way to his head.

"Have that car put up in the garage and see that it isn't taken out again. Understand?"

Hez grinned widely, widely enough to include Tom, who was standing apart.

"By nobody, sir?" His tones vibrated with unholy joy.

"By nobody," growled the Judge. "Is that plain enough? The car's for sale. Tack up a notice in the post-office to that effect. Hurry now."

Hez hurried. He shot one malignant, maddening glance at Tom, and vanished.

The Judge addressed himself to Mrs. Wilson.

"Hemingway won't stick me again," he threatened. "Jane assures me that he opens his gate and shoos his live stock into the road whenever he sees my car coming, and that's a prison offense."

"That's exactly what he does," said Jane. "He ought to be put in jail."

Tom forced a laugh. "You've got the right idea," he chimed in.

Mrs. Wilson moved uneasily toward the door.

"I'm sorry I can't stay to see what happens," she said. "Coming, dear?" she asked Tom.

"I want to talk with Judge Belknap a minute," he responded, deliberately. "We both have something to say to each other, I believe."

His mother hesitated.

"Please don't wait," said Tom, quickly. "I'll be along pretty soon."

"I'll go with you as far as the street," said Jane. "I want a little walk, anyway. I'll be back shortly, Dad."

She drew Mrs. Wilson's arm through hers, and led her from the room.

CHAPTER VII

A TRIUMPH FOR WOMAN SUFFRAGE

TOM at the window, watched his mother and Jane half way down the drive before he turned to confront the Judge. Belknap seated himself behind his table, armed himself with a sheaf of papers, and retired into his professional shell. Thus fortified, he awaited the onset. Tom stood before him. The Judge went on reading. Tom opened hostilities with a cough. The Judge couldn't hear. Tom coughed again, insistently.

The Judge looked up. He put down his papers with a frown of annoyance.

"Well, sir," he demanded sharply, "what do you wish to see me about?"

It was Tom's day of battles, and one more didn't matter. The Judge's manner failed to abash him. His eyes challenged the Judge's frown.

"What's your idea in getting my mother worried about me?" he asked.

The Judge was not prepared for this simple directness. He hastened to interpose a disclaimer.

"I hope I haven't worried her," he said.

"But you have," declared Tom. "She's up in the air a thousand feet. What have you been telling her?"

Belknap took refuge in generalities. "Only what I felt it my duty to tell her," he replied. "She says you want to go to New York."

"I do, but—" persisted Tom, "I don't want my mother made unhappy about it."

"It's not a question of her happiness, but of your future," Belknap replied. "I think she realizes that now."

Tom stuck to the question. "I'm not going to New York till I can go right," he declared. "Just at present I'm satisfied where I am."

"What do you mean by 'going right'?" asked the Judge, with sarcastic emphasis.

Tom's plans for his mother were his own business, he reflected. He contented himself with replying: "When the proper opportunity presents itself."

"You don't seem to think much of the opportunities here in Fairview," observed the Judge.

"Yes, for some fellow that wants to be the town constable. Now Hez"—he paused and looked the Judge full in the eye—"Hez would regard that job as the pinnacle of success. I"—another emphatic pause—"want something better."

He took a turn up and down in front of the Judge's table.

"This town's good enough in its way." Tom wanted to be perfectly fair to his birthplace. "But—there's a lack of enterprise."

"And how do you make that out?" asked Fairview's leading citizen, with the air of one who thirsts for enlightenment.

"Take yourself for instance," advised Tom. The Judge stiffened. "You are by far the wealthiest man we have. When there's anything to be done, everyone looks to you." The Judge let down a trifle.

"Yet — what have you done?"

Tom propounded this delicate question in the triumphant tone of one who clinches his argument. The Judge gripped the arms of his chair and looked at Tom while he swallowed hard, twice. Tom's face was as unconscious as a baby's. The Judge tamed himself.

"I've done my share, I think," he said, in a voice from which any trace of irritation had been carefully filtered.

"Oh, yes," Tom acknowledged, "you've given us a soldiers' monument that's increased taxation and a library filled with books that nobody reads. Why don't you give us something worth while? Something," he added, "that the town really needs?"

"For instance?" asked the Judge.

"A newspaper," elucidated Tom. "Why, there isn't another town of our size in the State that hasn't a local sheet."

"We are too near the large cities to need a paper

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of our own," objected the Judge. "We manage to get the news."

"National and world news, yes," admitted Tom. "But what of the local stuff? I should think you would want one, if only to advance your own interests. You've exhausted the political possibilities of Fairview," he argued. "Soon you'll want to go farther. With a live newspaper behind you"—Tom's tone was enthusiastic now—"you might go to Congress. Why not? But a newspaper, the right kind of a newspaper, is absolutely essential."

Tom was walking up and down excitedly. The Judge halted him with a question.

"How would that bring opportunity—to you?"

"I'll run the paper for you," explained Tom.

The Judge allowed himself to smile. "What makes you think you are qualified for such a position?" he asked.

Tom took a card from his pocket and handed it to Belknap. He stood with his hands in his pockets, a satisfied smile on his face, as the Judge read:

.....
: This Is To Certify That :
: THOMAS WILSON :
: Is The Fully Accredited :
: Representative Of :
: THE BUFFALO HERALD :
: For Fairview :
: And Immediate Vicinity :
.....

The Judge tossed the card on the table.

"I don't think we need discuss the subject any further," he said.

"That's up to you," said Tom. "But there's one thing I wish you would do."

"What's that?" asked the Judge.

"Let mother alone. She has troubles enough without worrying her about me."

"You mustn't forget that I have a personal interest at stake," said the Judge. Tom braced himself. "My daughter's welfare," added the Judge.

Tom had felt it coming. "Oh, I'm not worrying about Jane," he said, airily.

"Neither am I—now," said the Judge. He rose to take the offensive.

"You mean, it's all off?"

The Judge was puzzled. Tom took it so gently.

"I think it is better to let the matter rest till you've shown what you can do," he said, not unkindly.

"You don't think I can take care of her. Is that it?" asked Tom.

"I've only your word for it," replied Belknap.

"Five dollars a week wouldn't do it," Tom reminded him.

"Can you do better in New York?"

"I should say so; three times as well." Tom drew from his pocket Kennedy's letter. The Judge was taken by surprise. He had meant his question

about New York for a poser, and this prompt and substantial reply impressed him. He knew Kennedy well. He looked at Tom with less disfavor.

Often as he was provoked with Tom, Belknap really liked this handsome, blue-eyed son of Jim Wilson's, and he would have been genuinely pleased to learn of his success. Now Tom had shown a disposition to do something; all might yet be well. Even his conduct during their morning interview was shown in a better light.

"You see, it isn't just what I want," Tom was explaining, "but it will help me to get really started."

The Judge smiled, encouragingly.

"Take it, by all means," he advised.

"Well, I haven't quite made up my mind," said Tom.

This answer displeased the Judge. If Tom had been diplomatic, he might even now have accommodated himself to the swing of the current and ridden on the flood tide of favor. But diplomacy was never an endowment of youth. The Judge hardened his heart.

"Just as you please," he said. "But meanwhile, I want you to understand that any arrangement you think you have had with Jane, is at an end."

"Don't you think she ought to have something to say about that?" demanded Tom.

Belknap hesitated. "Perhaps she has," he said.

He was thinking of Jane's demeanor during the dispute a few minutes before. Her taking away of Mrs. Wilson, her delayed return, too, had a significance that had not escaped him. After all, Jane was a sensible girl. Why not let her and Tom have it out? It might well result just as he wished. It was worth trying.

"Perhaps she has," he repeated. "Would you like to talk with her?"

"I'd like to find out where I stand," said Tom.

The Judge stepped to the open window.

"Jane," he called. "Jane." She answered from down the drive. "Come here a minute, please," he cried.

The Judge walked to a side door. He turned and bowed permissively to Tom.

"Go ahead," said he, and went out, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER VIII

JANE EXERCISES THE FRANCHISE

“WHY, where’s Dad?” asked Jane, looking around the room with surprise, as she entered and found Tom standing there alone.

“In there,” replied Tom, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the door Belknap had taken. He put himself in her path as she started towards it and looked down upon her with a funereal face.

“Your father wants me to talk to you,” he explained.

If, either by Tom’s explanation or by some rapid intuition of her own, Jane’s surprise was lessened, neither her looks nor her speech betrayed the fact.

“Talk to me? What about?” she inquired wonderingly.

“About you,” said Tom.

Jane laughed. The youth was so divertingly solemn. “That will be very interesting,” said she.

“I don’t think it’s any joke,” rejoined Tom in a voice that reeked with reproach. He stepped closer.

“Jane,” he demanded, his blue eyes searching

the brown depths of hers, "do you care anything for Hez Jenks?"

"Why!" She drew a quick breath. This was a genuine surprise. "What do you mean?"

"There can be only one meaning to that question," said Tom, with mournful earnestness. "Do you?"

Jane's poise had been disturbed only for an instant. There was an amused gleam in the brown eyes as she replied:

"No, not in that way."

The bare words were enough for Tom. "That's all I want to know," he declared, with an air of great relief. "Gee, but they threw a scare into me just now," he added, "first Hez, and then your Dad."

And, with this scant explanation, he two-stepped gleefully across the room. Jane's curiosity couldn't stand the pressure. She followed.

"What did they say?" she asked.

"Hez told me that I had no right to object to his attentions to you." Tom could laugh now at his recent anxiety. Two tart words cut his merri-ment short.

"You haven't," said Jane.

Tom stood agasp. "I haven't?" he echoed.

"No."

Tom was getting befogged.

"Then you do care for him," he stammered.

"I didn't say that."

"You mean you don't care for me?"

"I didn't say that, either."

Tom's bearings were wholly lost.

"See here, Jane," he exclaimed hotly. "I want it made absolutely clear. Am I being turned down?"

"Why, Tom!" said the girl, shocked at his outburst.

The note of pain in her voice sobered Tom. He had never heard it there before. It made him feel like a brute.

"I can't go on living in a fool's paradise," he said, contritely. "You know I haven't made any secret of my love for you. I thought you felt the same towards me. If you've changed your mind for any reason, or if you think you've made a mistake, I want you to say so frankly."

"Have your feelings changed?" Jane asked him.

"Good Lord, no," he exploded.

"Then why do you want me to say that mine have?" she pursued.

"I don't want you to say so." He regarded her wistfully. "Unless it's true," he added.

"It isn't true," said the girl, softly.

Tom hardly knew whether to feel pleased or abused. He thought of his needless display of temper. "Then why was it necessary to get me all worked up about it?" he demanded.

"I didn't mean to do that," Jane answered. "I merely want you to understand that you haven't any rights — as yet."

The brown eyes met the blue ones steadily. A bewildered expression crept into Tom's gaze.

"What have I got?" he asked at last.

Jane contemplated him with a perplexity almost equal to his own. How could she, without overstepping the bounds of maidenly convention, put this preposterous lover in his place? She motioned him to a low divan.

"Sit down, Tom," she said. He seated himself grudgingly on the edge of the cushion, his elbows on his knees, his fingers locked. Jane stood over him.

"I want to speak to you seriously," she prefaced.

Tom bounced from the divan. "Then all you've been saying so far is a joke," he cried, in a fresh outburst of remonstrance.

"No," said Jane, "but I haven't explained what I want to."

She laid a soft, restraining hand on Tom's coat-sleeve. Tom sunk reluctantly back into his former attitude.

"I'm glad to hear you admit it," he grumbled.

Jane's perplexity grew into embarrassment as she looked down upon Tom's irresponsive occiput. Tom could feel her gaze on the back of his head, but he sat moodily silent.

"You say you love me," Jane began, at last. He looked up at her blankly.

"Do you?" she asked, with an inflection that might have denoted slight impatience.

"Well!" cried Tom, in high dudgeon at this absurdity. "What do you suppose I've been raving about all this time?"

Jane tranquilly ignored this protest. She had committed herself now, and was not to be swerved from her course. She seated herself on the divan. Inconsiderate Tom had failed to notice that the seat to which she had pointed him, was amply commodious for two.

"When two people love"—Jane calmly smoothed out her skirts—"the ultimate realization is marriage."

"Correct," assented Tom. "Object, matrimony." He grinned a foolish grin. Jane went on with her catechizing.

"We've never discussed that part of it, have we?"

"Oh, see here," expostulated Tom, raising his head to face her. "I've always taken that part of it for granted."

"But we've never discussed it," persisted the girl. "In fact, I don't think that you've ever asked me to marry you."

"If I haven't it was an oversight," protested

Tom. It was very annoying, this sudden streak of speciousness in Jane.

Jane smiled. "But I had to take that part of it for granted," she reminded him.

"Good Heavens, Jane!" exclaimed the badgered youth. "It seems to me I've asked you a million times."

Jane drew a long breath for steadiness' sake.

"I understand perfectly, Tom," she said. "It's been that way ever since we were children. I never thought of anyone else, and I don't suppose you have. But we are no longer children. We have grown up, and now we must face the future."

She paused. Tom thoughtfully regarded his knuckles. A tinge of color rose into her cheeks, but she went on in a low, even voice:

"You see, Tom, a woman grows older more rapidly than a man. Perhaps, she's born older. At any rate, she reaches the crisis of her life long before the man does, and"—her voice wavered, dropped almost to a whisper—"I've reached mine now."

Jane's head drooped with her courage. Her cheeks smarted. She was glad that Tom's fists continued to engross his attention.

"What do you mean by a crisis?" he asked presently.

"Marriage," she faltered.

"Oh-h-h," said Tom, and sat bolt upright.

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There was a gleam in his eye that was one part understanding and two parts pleased and hopeful inquiry. Jane caught the full import of his gaze, with its invitation to proceed, and her confusion became complete.

"It may not sound modest to talk like this"—she stumbled painfully through the words—"but I haven't any mother to go to."

She was mortified that Tom should have placed the boldest possible construction upon her speech. His reply did not serve to soothe her wounded pride.

"You will have when you marry me," he said, folding his arms contentedly. She turned on him quickly.

"You're taking it for granted we will be married?"

Tom stared. "Won't we?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Jane.

"Then where is all this talk leading to?" he asked impatiently.

"To an understanding, I hope," Jane answered a trifle wearily. She was making so little progress. It was discouraging.

"What is there to understand? I love you and you love me, and the finish is marriage." Tom spoke with an air of triumphant conclusiveness.

"And what then? What about the future?" persisted Jane.

"The future?" repeated Tom.

"Yes, the future."

Tom's face brightened. "Oh, you mean after we are married."

"Yes."

"Why, I'll always love you Jane." Tom looked hurt that Jane should seem to cast a doubt upon his eternal loyalty. That any problem of domestic economy was involved in her questioning, did not enter his head.

Jane nursed her chin in baffled silence. She fell to studying the face before her. Aside from its elemental juvenility, it expressed nothing but simple and sincere vexation at her lack of faith. There wasn't a disingenuous line in its make-up. Evidently, if she would pursue this line further, she must use unvarnished English. Subtleties of expression were wasted on Tom's sentimental singleness of soul.

The fact was that, within the last few minutes, Jane had received some surprising new impressions of Tom Wilson, and now, half-unconsciously, she was seeking to collect and arrange them for her immediate necessities. Like her father, she had been disappointed in Tom. Almost she might have adopted the Judge's words: "I'm sorry to say that the boy isn't what I thought him." But Jane wasn't going to leave the boy to his foolishness, as

her father had done. She felt sorry for Tom, more than she blamed him. His boyish irresponsibility was irritating, most irritating. But it was characteristic of Tom, and he had failed only in rising to meet a crisis — her crisis, which she had thrust upon him. He could not be held responsible for being irresponsible. That would be robbing irresponsibility of its sole perquisite. Jane was trying to be just.

Besides, she had more at stake than her father. For the sake of an ancient pledge, the Judge had sought "to make a man of Jim's son," and failed. For the sake of her own happiness, Jane must not fail.

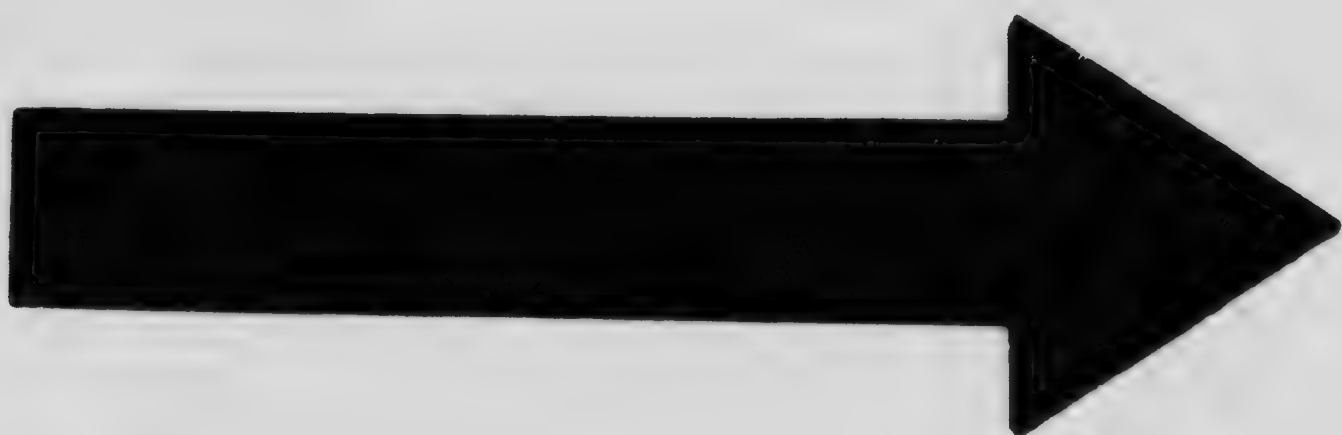
Tom was growing fidgety under her long scrutiny. Jane drew a deep breath.

"Either you can't or you won't understand me," she resumed. "There is a practical as well as a romantic side to marriage. It involves great responsibilities."

Tom jumped to his feet. "Oh," he said petulantly, "I suppose you're thinking about that job again."

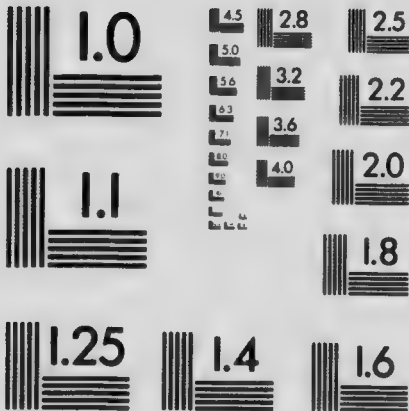
"I'm thinking of your attitude in regard to it," said Jane.

"Great Scott, Jane!" exclaimed Tom. "Lots of fellows have got married with less prospects than I have. It's the responsibilities of marriage that



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make them hustle. It gives them an incentive. Give me the incentive and I'll be the finest little hustler you ever saw."

Jane looked unconvinced.

"It's only a question of time till I strike something big," argued Tom. "Luck can't run against me forever."

Jane rose the better to declare herself.

"That's just it, Tom," she said. "It's that that makes me afraid. You look on everything as just a matter of luck."

"Then what is it?" he asked.

"Character."

Tom's face indicated renewed perplexity. "A woman is dependent upon her husband's character for her happiness," Jane explained.

"What's the matter with my character?" demanded the harassed youth.

Now, if ever, was the time for candor.

"You haven't any," said Jane.

"What?" shrieked Tom.

"It hasn't formed," continued Jane. She was giving Tom the resultant of her late impressions and her cogitations thereon, and she pronounced judgment with careful deliberation. "It hasn't crystallized. You're only an irresponsible boy, without one settled aim or conviction."

Tom threw up his hands, in despair at such unreasonableness. "You needn't go any further,

Jane," he said. "If this is to be a psychological analysis of something I haven't got, it's too deep for me." He hesitated a moment, then approached her and seized her hands. "There's only one thing in my mind and that is — do you want to marry me? I haven't any fears for the future, not one, and, if you want to see me prove my love and my ability to provide for you, come right out with me now, and we'll get married without telling a soul about it. What do you say?"

He stopped breathlessly. Jane, struck dumb by this precipitate wooing, her pulses quickened, her will relaxed despite herself, could frame no reply. Tom's grasp on the girl's hands tightened. He drew her closer.

"Will you take a chance with me?" he urged. "Will you marry me?"

Jane rallied her scattered forces. She fought to free her hands.

"No," she said. Her voice was stubborn with the effort the syllable cost her.

"You won't?"

"No — I — won't."

Tom dropped her hands. "That settles it then." He dug his hands savagely into his trousers pockets and swaggered to the window.

Jane followed him with misty eyes. She waited. Tom wrapped himself in tragic silence and stared out across the lawn. She walked up behind him

and placed a coaxing hand on his shoulder. Tom didn't move so much as an eye-muscle.

"I love you, Tom," she said timidly.

"Fine," said Tom, out of the window. "First you roast me to a cinder, then you tell me that you love me."

"It's because I do love you that I'm telling you all this."

Tom shrugged his free shoulder. "Just to make me feel good," he commented.

"To make you realize the best that is in you," returned Jane. "I want you to be big and strong. I want you to be — a man."

The word stung, as she meant it to. Tom wheeled upon her. "You make me think I'm a baby," he said.

"You're a boy, with a boy's ideals. You haven't the slightest knowledge of real life."

Tom suppressed a wrathful reply. Every time he lost his temper, Jane made her point. He broke into a derisive laugh.

"That's right. Rub it in right while you're about it," he said. "I suppose you think you have the wisdom of Solomon."

"I have the intuitive knowledge that is born in every woman," replied Jane, rather ponderously and ineffectively, she felt.

Tom's masculine superiority was not to be put down with mere commonplace. "That means," he

retorted, "that you've seen all there is to see and know all there is to know." He capped his speech with a bow of enforced and reluctant admiration.

"Tom," the girl entreated, almost with a sob. Her hands flew to her face.

Tom abandoned that line of defense instantly. He was being made to feel like a brute again. Jane was very near to tears, the last mode of feminine attack, and the deadliest. Tom weakened at the prospect. It was his first experience of such warfare, but the eternal cowardice of his sex mastered him. He was ready to capitulate.

"All right," he said surlily. He walked back to the divan in token of submission. "I'll admit everything you say. I'm no good — don't know a thing — haven't any right on earth." He flopped into his seat, kerplunk. "What do you want me to do?"

Jane smiled inwardly at this heaped-up irony. She had won, and she knew it, and could well afford a final fling to the vanquished. She took her old stand in front of him, to dictate the terms of surrender. The office was a novel one. She found it a trifle awkward. She had recourse to parable.

"I want you to find yourself," she began.

"Where?" queried matter-of-fact Tom.

"In the crucible of experience."

"Just what do you mean by that?" The question helped her. She specified:

"Go out into the world of men and women and learn to know yourself. Find out what it is you want, and then try to get it."

"I know now what I want. You."

"I know what I want," she parried. "Love and protection."

Tom hesitated a moment. "Can't I give you both?" he asked.

"You haven't tried."

"What do you suppose I've been doing?" he cried.

"Only talking," said Jane. She was pretty sure of her ground to venture that — almost too sure, it seemed. Tom's brow wrinkled. She went on quickly:

"You can't know what it is you want. You've spent your whole life here in Fairview, among the village people. You've never been anywhere."

"I've been to Buffalo," he pleaded.

"Yes, for two weeks."

"That was long enough."

Jane refused to be drawn into a discussion of Buffalo as a fortnightly crucible of experience. She continued: "It wouldn't matter if you were content to remain here, but you are not. You have always had a desire to go to a large city. Sooner or later, you will go. And what then?"

She paused to assure herself of Tom's undivided attention.

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"You've never seen real life," she reiterated. "How do you know you won't see some girl you'll like better? Some girl who is prettier or better suited to your new standards? And, if such a thing should happen—" Tom was grinning. She paused again, impressively. Tom straightened his face—"if such a thing should happen, how much better it will be that you are free to choose. For that is the way I want you to feel, perfectly free, so far as I am concerned."

There was a hint of defiance in her tones, a vague challenge, not to the boy beside her, but to the man he was to become. The boy did not get it. He laughed lightly.

"That's absurd," he said.

"No, it isn't," she persisted. "Many a man has ruined his life by choosing before he knew what he really wanted—many a woman, too. Besides, there's your career. If you are to have one, you must soon begin. You can't go through life just waiting for what luck will bring you. As for me, I'm a girl, and I can't wait—long.

Tom's face lengthened. He was beginning to see lights.

"Think it over, Tom," the girl concluded, very softly.

There was a long silence. Tom rose to his feet.

"I have a chance to go to New York," he said.

"Do you want me to go?"

"I think it will be best," she said, striving to hide her elation.

"Soon?"

"As soon as possible."

"I see what you mean, Jane," announced Tom with an air of discovery. "I've got to make good."

"You will," said Jane. "You must."

"I guess you're right, Jane. In fact, I know you're right. It's hard to face the truth sometimes, but, when it hits you full in the face and gets under the skin, a fellow has to admit it, even if it does hurt. There isn't much to me," he went on dolefully. "I can see that now. But I've still got a chance, and I'm going to take it."

His voice rang at the end with the clear note of determination. "Good," said Jane joyfully. "That's the way I like to hear you talk."

Tom was all energy now. He walked up and down on his toes as he talked.

"How long do you give me?" he asked.

"To make good?"

"Yes."

"Just as long as you like."

Tom came to a standstill. "No," he objected. "That wouldn't be fair. You've just said you couldn't wait long."

"Six months," suggested Jane. "A year."

"And then, what?"

"Then, if you are still of the same mind about me — come back."

"You're on." Tom seized her hand and pumped away rapturously. "I'll see mother right away. She'll let me go. She said so this afternoon."

His enthusiasm was catching. "You'll succeed," cried Jane, exultant at the turn affairs had taken. "I know you will."

"You bet I will," he boasted. "And I'll show some of the people here what a fellow can do in a large city."

He strode to the window and looked out doubtfully. Heaven be thanked! The dilatory genius of all messenger boys had proved too strong for the malice of Hez Jenks. The automobile was still where Tom had left it.

"Let's go for a drive and talk the whole thing over," he proposed.

Jane tripped from the room to find her hat, just as her father, anxious at the long delay, entered by the door opposite. The Judge was plainly surprised at her gaiety of motion. He turned inquiringly to Tom, who stood by the window, his hands jammed in his coat pockets, a sheepish grin on his face.

"Well?" said Belknap.

"I guess you were right about that," said Tom.

"Yes?" questioned the Judge, with a pleased glance through the door Jane had taken.

"Only in a way, though," supplemented Tom.

"Jane made a fine suggestion."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to New York. If I make good within a year, I'm coming back, and we'll be married."

"If you make good," repeated the Judge, with much significance of emphasis.

"Oh, I'll make good, all right."

The Judge contemplated the cocksure youth with a prophetic eye, but curbed himself.

"Nothing would please me better," he said simply.

"Then you approve," said Tom.

"I think it a very wise arrangement."

It was not an enthusiastic approval, but Tom was too full of his plans and of Jane's ingenuity to notice that.

"Funny how clever women are about these things," he observed, by way of a delicate compliment to Jane's father. "Neither of us would have had sense enough to think of an idea like that." He jogged Belknap's elbow affably. "Now, would we?" he asked.

The paternal face and neck seemed suddenly to swell with flattery. The paternal eye gazed congestedly at Tom. Even the paternal voice seemed affected, for, when the Judge spoke, it was with an effort that had all the effect of boisterousness.

"Oh, no," he bellowed. "The idea is much too big for either of us." His fingers worked at his collar. "When do you expect to leave?" he asked abruptly.

"To-morrow," said Tom.

"I presume you will accept the position with Mr. Kennedy?"

"It will do to start with. It will give me a chance to look around."

"Just so," commented the Judge.

"I'm ready, Tom," announced Jane, at the door. She stopped at the little mirror to straighten her hat. "Come along," she cried. She stepped out through the French window and disappeared down the piazza.

Tom lingered.

"Good-bye, Judge Belknap," he said, extending his hand. "I'll see you before the year is out."

"Provided you don't fail," croaked the Judge.

"No chance of that," chirruped Tom.

"But if you do."

"Don't you worry," said Tom. He paused with his hand on the window. "I'll never show up here a failure. So long."

Hez Jenks entered, out of breath, five minutes later. He found the Judge in his armchair, buried in thought.

"I couldn't find all the bills, sir," whined Hez,

forestalling a rebuke. "They must have been put in the wrong file."

The Judge did not stir.

"And the car is gone. I guess Tom Wilson took it."

The Judge eyed him with disgust.

"Leave your bills on the table," he growled, "and clear out."

CHAPTER IX

THE PROMISED LAND

IT was near the dinner hour Mrs. Bannan's Fifty-first street boarding house. Lucy, the black maid-of-all-work, was shuffling about the long table in the stuffy basement room where the Bannan boarders were wont to assemble three times a day to absorb their allotted shares of the deglutibles dispensed by Mrs. Bannan under the sacred name of food.

The room was carpetless, dingy, bare of all furniture except the indispensable tables, chairs, and sideboard, and an intrusive sewing machine. The cloth that Lucy was straightening, had already received its baptism of soup. Aside from this casual decoration, the sole pretense at embellishment was a pair of panels, one of fruit, the other of fish, which hung, one on either side of the double doors that gave entrance from the hall and areaway. Even these bits of virtue might conceivably be dedicated to utility rather than to beauty, their presence serving to stimulate, by power of toothsome suggestion, such salivary or gastric activity as might be essential to the continued health and solvency of Mrs. Bannan's paying guests.

It was toward this hospitable goal that Fred Merkle bent his steps, when, having fought his way clear of the sweltered subway throng at Fiftieth street, he found himself on Broadway, with collar wilted and temper awry. It was the close of a scorching June day, the fourth of its kind, and the worst; the crest of the season's first hot wave; the climax of one of those merciless periods when New York's asphalted canyons, its precipices of iron and brick and stone, turn to a huge storage reservoir for the sun's fierce rays; when days of torment alternate with sleepless, breathless nights; when vitality ebbs and nerves shrivel and crack; when men and horses fall in the street; when tenement babies die gasping, and tenement owners gather their wives and children and flee to mountain and shore.

Fred Merkle was not of the number of the elect. It had been his task to chronicle the fortunes of those who stayed.

All day long, and through the long days preceding, he had sat at his desk in the office of the *Evening Orb*, fashioning the tale of the city's distress. From police and hospital reports he had made up the roll of the dead and the prostrate, checked it, corrected it, added to it, alphabetized it, and set down its mounting total. Hundreds of cases of individual distress, each the kernel of a tragedy, had passed under his eyes and hands in "copy." After the first day most of these had found their

way to "the hook," for misery in the mass is of a dull sameness, and news space is always crowded. Some unusually pathetic incident, some bizarre bit perhaps, might win its way into type. Then there was constant watch to keep on the Weather Bureau, with its precise records of temperature and humidity, degrees and percentages that meant life and death; with its inexorable predictions, its postponed promises of relief. And then, to blazon forth the whole under flaring, super-heated headlines — a fresh scream for every edition, a fresh edition every hour!

Truly a nerve-wracking job for a sensitive man, even though he worked under the shelter of an electric fan.

Merkle had never been classed as a sensitive man, by himself least of all. To his associates at desk and table, he was perhaps best known as "The Grouch," and he accepted the title, had come to prize it, in fact, for the immunities it conferred. He was disliked for his surly manner, feared for his sharp tongue, and, in general, let alone. Merkle preferred it so.

As he threaded his way westward, Merkle was not wasting any pity on himself or his parched fellow citizens. He was conscious only of that lassitude, that feeling of frayed nerves, which may come to a man of forty-five at the close of an exhausting day's work. He was passing through the "Gas-

oline Belt," and the heavy smell of garages and smoking automobiles struck him in the face. He felt the need of a drink.

As he reached the short flight of steps that led down into the Bannan area and the region beyond, a new odor — pungent, penetrating, overwhelming, rose to his harassed nostrils. It was the peerless perfume of freshly fried onions. His foot hung at the top step.

Westward the sun still lingered, a ball of red fire, in the haze above the North River. Down in the basement the gas jets had been lighted and turned low, and they flickered, sickly yellow, in the remnant of daylight that filtered through the area gratings.

Merkle pulled his hat down over his eyes like a man facing a noxious blast, and took the plunge. He halted in the double doorway, between the fruit and the fish.

"Dinner ready yet?" he growled. Merkle growled by habit. It sustained his rôle of "The Grouch." Sometimes, by way of variety, he snarled. When emphasis seemed necessary, he barked.

Lucy, the black maid, faced him, a vinegar cruet in her hand.

"No, sir, it ain't," she said.

Merkle consulted his watch. "It's half past six," he announced.

"The bell ain't rang yet," explained the black.

"How soon?"

"'Bout a minute."

Merkle stepped across the threshold. He sniffed the air. "Gee, it's close in here," he grumbled. "Why don't you open a window?"

"Can't do more than I'se a'doin'," whined the girl.

Merkle nodded a surly assent. "The old lady does keep you hustling," he said. He strode to the window and threw it open with a bang, then seated himself at the little table there, drew a newspaper from his pocket and began to read with the conscientious care which the faithful newspaper man gives to the reading of every newspaper, even in his hours of ease.

There was a clatter of footsteps on the stairway that led from the floor above. Merkle threw down his paper with a frown of annoyance, which softened almost to a smile as Tom Wilson entered the room. Tom did not notice the silent figure by the window.

"Say, Lucy," he began.

"Dinner ain't ready yet," she interrupted shrilly. She eyed Tom with the impudent stare of the Tenderloin black. To Merkle she had been sullenly deferential. Merkle noted the difference and pricked up his ears. He was wise in the ways of boarding house servants and board-

ing house finance. Merkle always paid in advance.

"What did you do with my things?" demanded Tom. "I can't find them anywhere."

"You've been changed to the third floor hall room back," said Lucy, showing twenty white teeth at a grin.

"What, has she moved me again?" asked Tom.

"Mrs. Bannan give that room you had to a new man," the girl condescended to explain.

"It's a wonder she wouldn't say something to me about it," lamented Tom. The black girl made no reply. She threw a last glance at the table, turned up the gas jets in the chandelier, and shuffled from the room into the kitchen behind.

Tom stood with his head sunk on his breast. He seemed disheartened, even daunted for the moment, by this new slap of fate and his landlady. Seven months in New York had left a subtle impress on Tom Wilson, nothing definite, some slight new trick of manner perhaps, a glint of anxiety in the blue eyes. Whatever it was, was no present business of Merkle's, and a warning rustle of the newspaper made Tom aware that he was not alone. He faced about with a start.

"Hello, son!" growled Merkle. "What's bothering you? What's your trouble?" There was a tang of sympathy in his harsh tones.

"Same old thing," replied Tom, with a dejection

he hardly tried to mask. "Keeps switching me around."

"Why don't you do some kicking?" suggested Merkle.

Tom hesitated. "Can't afford to," he confessed.

Merkle looked the boy over commiseratingly. "Bad as that, eh?" he drawled.

Tom was not looking for commiseration. He pulled himself together.

"That to-night's paper?" he asked briskly. "May I see it a minute?"

"Sure," said Merkle. He handed it over. "Haven't you found anything yet?" he asked presently.

"Nothing definite," said Tom, from behind the opened paper. His tone was such as to discourage too intimate inquiry.

Merkle sat silent for a bit. "You'll find the want ads in the back, if that's what you're looking for," he volunteered.

Tom turned the leaves without reply.

"How did you come to lose your job?" persisted Merkle.

Tom dropped the paper to his side with a hopeless gesture.

"Couldn't hit it off with the boss," he replied. "Kennedy expected me to work at the desk all day and then go straight home to bed. That's always

the way when you work for a friend of the family," he concluded bitterly.

Merkle passed his hand slowly over his bald spot. It was an extensive, fore and aft bald spot, and the exploration took Merkle some time. Then, for a season he thoughtfully rubbed his chin.

"What's your particular line of labor?" he asked, when he looked up at last.

"Any old thing, so long as it pays a decent salary," said Tom.

Merkle seemed disappointed. "This is an age of specialty, kid," he said. "There isn't much demand these days for the man who can do anything. However," he added, seeing Tom's face fall, "there's no use getting discouraged about it."

"I'm not discouraged," Tom hastened to assure him. "It's inconvenient sometimes, not having any money. But I'll pull through all right."

"That's right," said Merkle. His hand slipped into his pocket as if by accident. "Old lady bothering you?" he asked, in a casual tone.

Tom felt, rather than saw, the gesture, with its implication. He drew away.

"Oh, a little," he said indifferently, "But I'm not worrying very much. If I get the job I've been promised, I'll get something big."

Merkle, a keen poker player, detected the bluff, but liked the boy the better for it. "That's right," he said again. "Keep plugging away and don't

lose your nerve." He thought of his own troubles and smiled grimly. "The trick is to hang on to your appetite," he said.

A bell rang clamorously on the landing above.

"There's the dinner bell," said Tom, glad of the interruption. "I must run upstairs and wash." Merkle half rose from his chair and laid a detaining hand on the youth's arm.

"Say, son," he inquired, "got any more of that liniment?"

"Is your rheumatism bad again?" asked Tom.

"No, that rub you gave me last night fixed me fine. That's great stuff. Where did you get it?"

"My mother put it up," said Tom. "Made me take a big bottle of it along. Never knew it was good for rheumatism, though."

"It certainly fixed me up," said Merkle, his gruff tones softening at the grateful recollection. "I'd like to have it around handy, if you can spare it, and it isn't asking too much."

"I'll come in to-night and give you another rub," Tom offered.

"No," protested Merkle. "I can't be putting you to all that trouble."

"That's all right," said Tom, "so long as I can be of any help."

There was a tapping of many heels on the floors above. The Bannan boarders were gathering fast.

It was a case of first come, first served, and early service often meant more than mere precedence.

"I'll be down in a minute," said Tom to Merkle. He made a bolt for the stairs, which he took three at a time.

CHAPTER X

MILK AND HONEY

“**A**M I the first?”

The fair owner of the swiftest pair of heels advanced two steps inside the door, and swept the room with a challenging eye. She was Miss Dorothy Dunstan, a chirpy blonde of uncertain age and authenticity, who, because of a lack of appreciative managers, had not yet become a famous prima donna.

Merkle took four long strides across the room and plumped himself down in his chair near the foot of the long table.

“You’re the first — after me,” he replied, and buried his nose in his newspaper, which he first propped against a caster at a convenient angle.

Miss Dunstan drilled the back of his head with a look.

“It’s very strange,” she observed spitefully, “how you manage to hear the bell before it rings.”

“I have inside information,” vouchsafed Merkle.

Miss Dunstan tossed her blonde head, partly to show her disdain of such vulgarity, partly because she had been told that the gesture was a becoming

one, had thereupon perfected it before her mirror, and now neglected no opportunity to exhibit it. But Merkle had returned to his survey of the news, and the toss would have been wasted, save for the timely entrance of Mr. and Mrs. Phelps.

"Hello, Merkle," said Phelps. Merkle grunted. Phelps was a pasty man, heavy of body, face, and speech. He was a salesman of some sort. Merkle didn't know what sort, and didn't care. "Commercial swine," he styled men of the Phelps type.

Mrs. Phelps turned to the rudimentary prima donna, who had seated herself near the head of the table with a theatrical grace that Mrs. Phelps secretly envied.

"Warm, isn't it?" she observed pleasantly.

"Very," returned Miss Dunstan. She scrutinized the vertically-striped casing of Mrs. Phelps's stubby figure. "Is that a new dress?" she inquired.

"Do you like it?" asked Mrs. Phelps warily.

"It's the one you had last Spring, isn't it? But you've done something to it."

Mrs. Phelps turned red. She caught a sardonic gleam in Merkle's eye, and turned redder. It cost her a violent effort to keep her temper where it belonged.

"Yes," she said. She seated herself opposite Miss Dunstan and hitched her chair closer to the table. "I got the idea from the way you fixed

over yours," she added, in sugary tones. "I neglected to thank you, my dear."

Miss Dunstan tossed her head so high and hard that it came near lifting her from her chair. Phelps broke into the conversation in the interest of harmony.

"Can I see a piece of your paper?" he asked Merkle, across the table.

"I'm not through," snapped Merkle, his eyes glued to the sheet.

Further amenities on the part of Mr. Phelps were now happily rendered needless by the entrance of Mrs. Bannan, and her progress from the door to the head of the board. The term "progress" is used advisedly, for no other word is adequate to express the translation through space of Mrs. Angelica Bannan.

Mrs. Bannan was fat, mountainously fat, but that was not the whole of it. Hummocks and ridges and rolls of fat had long since effaced her original outlines and brought her proportions to naught. Festoons of fat swung from her jowls like wattles as she moved across the floor. If the naked truth could be told, Mrs. Bannan was probably the fattest woman in New York outside of a museum. But fat was not all of Mrs. Bannan. There was Brobdingnagian bone beneath her bigness. Verily she was ponderous, but her ponderosity was that of the elephant rather than of the porker. Her bulk

was dirigible, her weight effective. She walked with an easy roll, but she did not wobble. She was a corn-fed Amazon, a mate fit for Gargantua. She was vast.

And, in her boarding house, her word was the law.

Mrs. Bannan grasped the corners of the table and lowered herself into her chair.

"Good evening," she saluted. She regarded the vacant chairs. "Where's the others?" she cried.

Without waiting for a reply, she turned to an oily, middle-aged German, who had trailed her in and who now stood bowing and smirking to the company.

"Sit down, dearie," said the giantess. The oily man, who answered to the name of Herman Leitz, took the chair at her left and fell to rubbing his hands. The landlady raised her head.

"Lu-cee," she called, "bring the soup. We're here." Her voice made the chandelier rattle. The kitchen door was behind her, as she sat, and, once planted in her chair, she found it easier to shout than to turn her head.

"You'd think people would have sense enough to hear the bell the first time," she complained, looking at Merkle, who paid no attention. "If some people knew how much trouble we had to keep their food warm, they wouldn't do so much kicking." Merkle was deaf.

She turned to the black girl, who was serving the soup. "Lu-cee," she inquired, "did you ring the bell on every floor?"

"Yes'm," responded the black meekly.

"Well, ring it again," she commanded. "And don't let the soup get cold."

"Hello, mother!" sang a cheery voice at the door. "What's on the bill to-night? Rush me through as quick as you can, will you?" And the speaker, a short, thickset man of thirty, with a breezy manner and an engaging smile, took the chair beside Merkle. The landlady raised her voice once again.

"Lu-cee," she cried, "bring Mr. Weinstein's soup."

"Oh, scratch the soup," said Weinstein. "Kid me along with the big meat number and all the little side surprises." Lucy was apparently familiar with the contents of the Weinstein vocabulary, for she went into the kitchen without a word. Weinstein turned to the oily man.

"Hello, Leitzzy!" he said. "How's the lady treating you?"

"I never complain," replied Leitz, with a complacent leer at his landlady.

"You're the satisfied kid, all right," remarked Weinstein.

"Why shouldn't he be?" demanded Miss Dunstan loudly. She let her glance wander from Leitz

to Mrs. Bannan, where it rested suggestively. "He gets the best of everything."

Mrs. Bannan half rose from her seat, then, succumbing to her emotions and the force of gravity, sank back again with a crash that threatened the integrity of her chair.

"This is a free country, Miss Dunstan," she shrilled. "If you're not satisfied with what you get here at eight a week, you know what you can do."

Weinstein thought it prudent to intervene. "Mother's right there with the come-back," he said, soothingly. "What's the news from the front, sweetheart?" he asked Miss Dunstan.

"I very nearly got an engagement to-day," she replied with a flash of animation that showed how much even this poor consolation meant to her. She had been considered, at least.

"How did you escape?" asked Weinstein gravely.

"I was just talking salary with a manager when another girl came in. He had met her in Paris."

Weinstein nodded sympathetically. "I know," he said. "He was under obligations."

Mrs. Bannan's voice broke in upon their colloquy.

"What made you so late to-night, Mr. Weinstein?" she asked.

"My boy didn't get back on time. Say, mother," he continued, with an impatient glance at

his watch, "hustle that dinge up, won't you? I'm getting nervous."

"You ain't the only one at this table, Mr. Joe Weinstein," boomed the landlady. "If you're in such a hurry, why don't you go to a quick lunch restaurant?"

"I'm payin' for it here, ain't I?" retorted Joe. "What's the use of squanderin' money? Times is too hard." He rose from his chair with extended arms as Lucy returned from the kitchen with a full tray. "Ah, come right here, fair one," he entreated, and helped her empty the tray.

Mrs. Bannan glared at him. "Lu-cee," she called, "take Mr. Leitz's plate. Through, darling?" she asked the oily one.

Leitz licked his lips. "Golly," he cooed. "That soup was fine."

Lucy began to collect the soup plates, starting with Leitz's. "You'd better ring that bell again," the landlady ordered. "If they don't hear it this time, they'll have to do without anything. I'm not running no all-night café."

Leitz squinted around the table. "Who ain't here yet?" he asked.

"Mr. Wilson and Miss LeRoy." Mrs. Bannan coupled the names with an "and" that staggered under the weight of accent placed upon it.

"Oh, they'll come in together," gurgled Leitz. "They always do."

"I think there's a case there, all right," interjected Phelps, with a judicial air. "When that boy first came here, I knew at once there would be something doing."

Merkle looked up from his paper. He fixed Phelps with a baleful eye.

"Know anything for sure?" he snarled.

"Oh, I'm not blind," said Phelps, with an air of jaunty indifference, but he shifted uneasily in his seat under Merkle's glare. Merkle stretched half way across the table towards him.

"If I were you, I wouldn't say anything unless I knew," he thundered.

"I haven't said anything," whined Phelps. Merkle returned to his paper. "I think she's a fine actress," Phelps went on plaintively. "I saw her in a show, and she was mighty good."

"Henry," said Mrs. Phelps. There was menace in her voice. "You didn't take me to that show."

"I — I couldn't, my dear," sputtered the indiscreet Phelps. "You see, I had to take some of the out-of-town buyers. I must show our customers a good time, because the house pays for it."

"Can't you take them to dramatic pieces?" demanded Mrs. Phelps.

"They can see that sort of thing at home. They only come to New York once a year," explained the harassed husband.

"I bet they don't bring their wives with them," nagged the woman.

"Of course not," blundered Phelps. "When they come here they expect to enjoy themselves."

The greatest of despots have never despised the artful aid of diplomacy. The Phelps combination occupied one of Mrs. Bannan's most expensive rooms, and, when the landlady saw the distress of the paying partner, she thought it not beneath her station to move, by indirection, to his relief.

"I just want to catch that LeRoy girl once," she announced, in a voice that silenced competition. She squelched Leitz with a look when he attempted to ask: "At what," and added, with seeming irrelevancy: "She don't look to me as if she could act."

"I'll get you a couple of seats some rainy night," volunteered Joe Weinstein, whose business was that of a ticket speculator.

"Where is she playing?" inquired the unsuspecting landlady, while those who knew controlled their risibles till Joe should give the release signal.

"On the roof," drawled Weinstein.

Mrs. Bannan joined unaffectedly in the general laugh at her expense. Miss Dunstan contributed a satirical staccato to the ensemble.

"She hasn't any part, though," she said, eagerly.

"You're mistaken, sweetheart," said Joe, reprovingly. "She has many parts. That's what

makes her so valuable to a musical show." Whereupon, as if realizing the need of another diversion, he began an energetic search for the vinegar. "Wake up, Leitzzy," he shouted. "Pass the chloroform."

"I ain't got it," protested Leitz.

"It's under Mr. Merkle's paper," said Mrs. Bannan.

Joe unceremoniously grabbed the caster that Merkle was utilizing as a lectern, complaining loudly the while. "Here," he cried. "What do you think you're doing? Concealing the evidence of a crime?"

Merkle grinned at him in friendly fashion as his paper fell flat, and promptly annexed a sugar bowl wherewith to prop it up again. Lucy shuffled in with a tray of roast beef, which straightway engrossed the general attention. Joe, seeing the danger point was passed, turned to the newspaper man with a comprehensive wink.

"How's the show business, Joe?" asked Merkle.

"Rotten," said Joe, with emphasis. "Not a hit in the town."

"What makes you so busy then?"

"The boss sent for me to-day," Joe explained. "Wants me to put some of the boys in front of his house. Makes a flash to see the 'specs' on the sidewalk. The rubes think the show is a hit, and

walk up and buy." He shook his head like a man deeply mystified. "Funny how they fall for that stuff," he said.

"It's all make-believe in this town, Joe," said Merkle, wearily.

"You're right there, bo," replied his friend. "Old P. T. B. had their number. They certainly like to be fooled."

The area bell jangled loudly.

"Lu-cee, see who's there," ordered Mrs. Bannan. "Maybe it's the ice cream."

There was an interested hush. Leitz's unctuous voice shattered the stillness.

"I heard a good joke to-day," he announced.

"Listen, Merkle," Joe adjured him. "Leitz's going to pull a funny one." Everybody sat expectant. Mrs. Bannan looked angrily at Joe.

"A bald headed man came into our barber shop to-day," began the German, "and he said: 'Give me something for my hair.' And my boy said: 'It ain't worth nothing.'" And Leitz began to laugh uproariously, holding his sides. Mrs. Bannan looked furious. The faces of the others were blank. The landlady kicked Leitz's shins under the table. He pulled himself up with a painful jerk, and was ready to weep.

"Get that, Merkle?" asked Joe, solicitously. "Bald headed men wants something for what he

hasn't got — great, eh? Ha-ha." He beamed encouragement on the barber. "We got you, Leitz," he said.

Phelps, not quite certain what it was all about, but willing to help, raised his voice.

"Did you ever hear that one about the French girl, who —"

Joe raised a warning hand. "Nix on that one, Phelps," he interrupted sternly. "Remember, there are ladies present."

Phelps raised both hands in disavowal, and sat with open mouth.

"You wait till I get you upstairs," threatened his spouse.

Phelps found his voice. "What for?" he remonstrated. "I didn't say anything. I didn't —"

The rest of his plea was lost in the eager bustle occasioned by the reëntrance of Lucy. Alas! The package she carried was of an unpromising flatness! The first glimpse showed that it almost certainly could not contain ice cream. Lucy's first word extinguished any flickering hope.

"Laundry," she announced. "For Mr. Weinstein."

Joe manfully sustained the ocular bombardment of the battery of disappointed Bannanites. "How much?" he inquired.

"Thirty-nine cents."

"Gee!" said Joe, exploring his pockets. "It

costs a fortune to keep clean in this town." He handed the money to the black. "Put the package up in my room," he directed.

"Put it on the sewing machine," came the quick countermand of the landlady. "Other people need waiting on as well as you."

"All right, mother," said Joe, good-humoredly. "Just to show I'm a good fellow, I'll take it up myself."

The telephone was heard to ring on the landing above.

"You go and see who it is, dearie," said Mrs. Bannan. The star boarder rose reluctantly to obey. "Lucy, take Mr. Wilson's plate away. We can't wait for him all night."

Merkle knew that, if Tom missed his dinner, he was likely to go hungry all night. "He was down here a minute ago," he said persuasively. "Said he was going up to wash."

"Ain't it funny," chimed in Joe, "how these guys from the country always wash before eating? After they are here a little while, they find that it pays best to eat first and wash afterwards. Say, Lucy, I'll take an encore on that roast beef. Find me a piece with a little more juice in it." Lucy took his plate and stood watching Mrs. Bannan, who forgot Tom in a fresh burst of irritation at Joe.

"Do you know how much my butcher bill was last month?" she bellowed. "A lot you care, Joe

Weinstein, whether I have enough to pay my rent or not."

The voice of Leitz was heard on the landing.

"Merkle, a lady wants to talk to you on the telephone." Merkle, deep again in the news, did not hear. Weinstein nudged him. Mrs. Bannan and Miss Dunstan echoed Leitz's outcries. The clamor finally penetrated to the recesses of Merkle's attention. He looked about, stupidly, like a man roused from sound sleep.

"What?" he inquired.

"The telephone," shouted all three.

"Oh!" he snorted, and, starting to his feet, hastened from the room.

"Ain't he the bear?" exclaimed Miss Dunstan, with a refined shudder.

"Most disagreeable man I ever had in my house," assented Mrs. Bannan. "If he wasn't the only one that paid his board regular, I'd ask him for his room."

Miss Dunstan rose majestically. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Bannan," she said with lofty courtesy. "I don't owe you anything."

"I said regular," rejoined Mrs. Bannan, with sturdy insistence. "There's been lots of times when I had to carry you over."

"Gracious!" ejaculated the other. "You don't expect to get paid in advance, do you?"

"It wouldn't insult me," confessed the landlady.

Leitz re-entered, bursting with information and importance. "Say," he tittered, "I got something to tell you. Miss LeRoy is in the parlor with a gentleman all dressed up like a horse."

"Wouldn't you think he'd have sense enough to know it was dinner time?" wailed Mrs. Barnan. "Lu-cee," she called, "ring the bell outside the parlor door, and keep on ringing it till Miss LeRoy comes out."

"Who is he?" inquired Joe.

"Must be a new one," replied Leitz. "I never saw him before. Hush," he added, as a quick step sounded at the door. "Here comes that Wilson boy."

CHAPTER XI

AMY LEROY

AS Tom Wilson walked to his seat at the foot of the long table, he was vaguely conscious that the Bannan boarders were honoring him with an unusual amount of attention. Every eye seemed to be focused upon him. Knives and forks were dropped or suspended in midair. Tom felt of his tie and looked his clothes over to see if, in his hurry, he had left anything awry. He knew nothing of Leitz's "new one," and had no means of divining that everybody in the room was wondering what he would say if he knew.

Tom felt that the circumstances required something of him. He paused beside his chair and said his "Good evening" with an elaborate bow to the ladies. He caught the landlady's pale, blue eye, with a curious look in it.

"I'm sorry to be so late, Mrs. Bannan," he said, with a propitiatory smile.

"Didn't you hear the bell?" demanded the giantess.

"I couldn't find my things. Somebody else's stuff is in my room."

"You've been moved to third floor back," said Mrs. Bannan. Her loud announcement caused a flood of access of interest in Tom.

"So I found out," replied the newly enlisted hall-roomer.

"That was a twelve-dollar room you had," vouchsafed Mrs. Bannan, "and I gave it to a new man. He works in a bank."

"I can't expect to compete with a banker, of course," said Tom, with the best smile at his command, "but I hope you'll let me know when I'm in the way again."

A quick flush suffused the fatty protuberances that served Mrs. Bannan as features. "I run my house to suit myself, Mr. Wilson," she bellowed. "Nobody ever gets the worst of it with me." She glared about the room. "Lu-cee," she shrieked.

"You sent her upstairs, Mrs. Bannan," Miss Dunstan reminded her.

The landlady's glare settled on Tom. "You'll have to wait till she comes down," she snapped.

"That's all right," said Tom, indifferently. "Where's Miss LeRoy?"

All eyes, with one consent, were turned on Leitz. "She's in the parlor with another gentleman," explained the oily man, nothing loath. A furious tintinnabulation began in the hall above. "Lucy is calling her down now," interpreted Leitz.

Merkle hastily re-entered. "Hello, kid," he

said. "That telephone was for you. Didn't know you were down here, or I would have called you."

"I thought she asked for Merkle," said Leitz.

Merkle turned on him savagely. "That's as near to Wilson as I'd expect you to get it," he roared.

"Somebody asking for me?" said Tom. "I wonder who it could be."

"Some lady who wouldn't give her name. I told her you were in the house, and she said she'd come over."

There was another volley of glances in Tom's direction. Merkle walked over towards the door, and scrutinized the panel of fruit with a critical eye. "I wonder who it could be?" repeated Tom, to his plate, oblivious of the stares of the others. Lucy re-entered with the cracked dinner bell in her hand.

"She's coming, Mrs. Bannan, in just a minute," she reported.

"Bring Mr. Wilson's soup," said the landlady, shortly.

"Yas'm," said the girl. She picked up Merkle's plate and made for the kitchen. The newspaper turned from his study of art just in time to see Tom flinging open the swing-door.

"Here," he howled. "Who took my plate? I hadn't finished."

The girl returned with a scared look on her face. She stood somewhat in awe of this irascible man, than whom, besides, no one was more liberal in the

way of tips. "'Scuse me, Mr. Merkle," she stammered. "I does get so excited sometimes." Merkle nodded a ready pardon. "I'll get yours in a minute, Mr. Wilson."

Tom was still communing with his plate. "No hurry," he said absently.

His preoccupation was suddenly dissipated when a girl tripped into the room. The newcomer was a slip of a thing, not more than eighteen years old, at most. Amy LeRoy was decidedly pretty — even Miss Dunstan would concede that — but it was with the rounded prettiness of a child rather than the unfolding charm of young womanhood. She had flaxen hair, with a glint of gold in it, and big eyes, of the blue of old crockery, which she turned on all mankind with the trustful stare of an over-innocent baby. Her expensive gown, of pale blue, clashed with the dingy background supplied by Mrs. Bannan's dining room, but it had been selected with taste and fashioned in the latest mode. Considering the probable size of her salary and her long periods of idleness, it was a constant matter for friendly speculation on the part of Mrs. Bannan's other lady lodgers, as well as the virtuously vigilant Mrs. Bannan herself, how Miss LeRoy managed to do it.

Despite her general resemblance to a vivacious dolly, Miss LeRoy conducted herself, under a fire of questioning eyes, with a hard self-possession that the militant landlady herself might have envied.

"Evening, everybody," she lisped pleasantly. "Hello, Miss Dunstan — Mrs. Phelps," with a merry nod to each. "Can I speak to you a moment, Mrs. Bannan?"

She walked the length of the room to Mrs. Bannan's side, circled the landlady's prodigious shoulders with her round, white arm, and, with a profusion of pretty noddings, whispered in her ear.

Mrs. Bannan reared herself to her full sitting height, and looked towards the door.

"Where is he?" she whispered hoarsely.

"Upstairs."

"Sure. Bring him down."

Tom's eyes had followed the girl's every move. "Hello, Amy," he said, as she made by him on her way to the door. She hesitated, then came to his side.

"Tom," she said, with her most engaging lisp, "I've persuaded Mr. Michaelson to have dinner with us. He's an awfully swell fellow and has an interest in the show, so I just have to be nice to him. Of course," she hastened to add, as she noted Tom's gathering frown, "it isn't going to change our arrangement for to-night."

"I don't think I'd better take you to the theater to-night, Amy," said Tom slowly.

"Now don't be mean, Tom," she coaxed.

"What's the use," said Tom, "so long as you've brought somebody?"

She sidled nearer to him, and put her face close to his. "Now don't be foolish, Tom," she pleaded. "Mr. Michaelson has to run away right after dinner, and I'll wait for you 'n the parlor. If you get through first, wait for me." She shook a playful finger under his nose. "Now be a good boy," she admonished him, and was away and out of the door without giving him a chance to refuse. Tom got to his feet, with more than half a mind to follow her.

"Lu-cee," called Mrs. Bannan. "Set the little table over there for Miss LeRoy. She's brought an extra dinner with her."

Joe Weinstein had been a benevolent observer of the colloquy between Tom and the girl, with its abrupt ending. While Lucy busied herself about the little table, he rose from his chair, went up to Tom, who was standing irresolute near the door, took him by the arm, and led him into a corner of the room.

"Say, Wilson," he began.

Tom looked at him with mild surprise. "Yes," he said inquiringly.

"I just want to put you wise," said Joe. "Don't take that dame too seriously."

"What do you mean?" said Tom.

"The skirt that was just in," elucidated Weinstein. "Don't let her get you buffaloed."

Tom eyed him coldly. "I'd thank you to make it a bit clearer," he said.

"You know what I mean," said Joe. "I'm tell-

ing you because you ain't been here long enough to know. Don't let her play you for a fall guy. She ain't the right kind."

Joe suddenly found himself backing energetically away from a clenched fist, which was vibrating unpleasantly near his valued nose. "You take that back," Tom was hissing between his teeth.

Merkle sprang swiftly from his seat, and, while Joe side-stepped nimbly behind the little table assigned to the lady in question, he seized Tom's arm and thrust him back into his chair by main force.

"Don't lose your head, kid," he counseled, his harsh voice harsher with earnestness. "He doesn't mean what you mean at all."

Joe returned roundabout to his seat. "Ain't that always the way when you try to help a pal?" he moaned.

Tom struggled to rise. "He said —"

Merkle cut him off with vehemence. "Never mind what he said," he insisted. "It's just a misunderstanding."

Mrs. Bannan, who had been pounding the table vigorously with her knife, here regained the speech of which Tom's audacity and Merkle's violence had bereft her. "Gentlemen," she boomed. "No rough house, please. This is a respectable establishment."

Tom composed himself. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Bannan," he said.

Miss Dunstan swished from her seat with an air of outraged gentility. "Isn't this place getting awful?" she wailed, and started for the door.

"Ain't you going to have dessert?" asked Mrs. Bannan.

Miss Dunstan dignified to consider. "Is it ice cream?" she asked.

"The ice cream hasn't come, so I'm going to give you blanc mange," said the landlady.

"Oh, horrors! And me on a diet!" exclaimed Miss Dunstan. But she resumed her seat.

"I thought this was ice cream night," complained Phelps.

"I just told you," replied Mrs. Bannan, enunciating each syllable with painful distinctness, "that my confectionery man disappointed me."

"Well," said Phelps, "where's my beer then?"

"It's all gone," was the reply.

"I ordered a case only last week," protested Phelps.

"You've drunk it all up," said Mrs. Bannan, with calm finality. "There's no more left."

Phelps jumped from his chair and hurled his napkin on the table. "This is a hell of a place," he said.

"Ain't you going to wait for your coffee?" asked his wife.

"No, I've had all I want," he shouted, and stalked from the room.

Mrs. Phelps raised her hands with a groan that implored the general sympathy. "Ain't it awful to have to live with a man like that?" she cried, and started after him.

"You picked him," Miss Dunstan reminded her.

Mrs. Phelps turned at the door. "At least I did pick something," she snapped. And leaving this Parthian arrow quivering in the maiden bosom of her friend, she flounced away.

Joe Weinstein grinned appreciatively. "I'll have some coffee," he announced.

Mrs. Bannan regarded him with disfavor. "Lucy can do only one thing at a time," she said. "She ain't no centipede."

What "come-back" Joe might have evolved to this "fall-down" will never be known, for, as he opened his mouth to reply, there was a rustle of silk skirts at the door, and conversation and all other table activities were suspended, the better to observe the début of Amy LeRoy's "new one."

CHAPTER XII

JIMMY MICHAELSON SCORES

THERE was a not too obvious air of defiance in the girl's manner as she led the way into the room, turned her back on the watchful company, and pointed to a chair at the small table by the window.

"You sit there, Jimmy," she said.

The "new one" moved towards the seat indicated, from which he could look down the whole length of the omnibus table, from Tom's back, at the near end, to the giantess facing him in the distance. Jimmy Michaelson was a dark, rather handsome young man, with hard lines about his mouth. He was well-set-up and well-groomed, but seemed somewhat ill at ease, perhaps from a feeling that his immaculate evening dress was a trifle out of place in his present surroundings.

As Michaelson stood waiting till she should have seated herself, a sudden thought came to Amy. "Just a moment," she said. "Oh, Tom," she called sweetly, "I want you to meet Mr. Michaelson."

Tom rose slowly and walked over towards the little table.

"This is Mr. Wilson, Jimmy," said the girl.

"Glad to know you," said Michaelson, extending his hand with a smile.

Tom grasped it languidly. "Same here," he said, and returned to his seat at the foot of the long table.

"Sit right down," said Amy to Michaelson. She took the seat opposite him, the effect of this manœuvring being to present her back to the spectators and reserve the sweet intimacy of her smiles wholly for Jimmy Michaelson. She leaned confidentially across the little table. "They're all rubbering their heads off," she said. "But don't give them any satisfaction."

"Who is the young chap you introduced me to?" asked Michaelson.

"Tom Wilson," she replied. Her sophisticated brows rose slightly. "Oh, he's just come from the country. Hasn't been here very long."

"Seems to know you pretty well," persisted Michaelson.

Amy, in her desire to conciliate Tom, had neglected to estimate the probable effect of her action on Jimmy.

"He's an awfully nice boy," she said impulsively. "So different from the men you meet here. He's the only one that treats me with any respect." She saw the man eying her curiously and changed her key. "I let him take me out once in a while," she

said, with an indifferent pout. "A girl can't walk down Broadway alone these nights. Every man talks to her."

She sighed pathetically and turned to Lucy, who was placing the soup before them. "Let's pass the soup," she suggested. "We ain't got any too much time. Just bring the principal things, Lucy, 'cause we're in a hurry."

Joe Weinstein had been taking notes. He leaned down the table towards Mrs. Bannan. "Who's the soup and fish?" he asked, a question which Mrs. Bannan's knowledge of Tenderloin slang enabled her to interpret as an inquiry concerning the identity of the gentleman in evening garb.

"Go on, ask her," urged Miss Dunstan, who was thanking her lucky stars she had remained. "You have a perfect right to know who she's bringing here."

It is easy to drive even a giantess along the line of her own inclination. Mrs. Bannan, summoned to the defense of her hearthstone, rose majestically, drew herself to her full height, shook herself into her corsets, threw back her shoulders, and advanced upon the foe like an army with banners. She took up a position within easy range of the little table and coughed to draw the enemy's fire.

The pair, deeply engrossed in each other, made no sign. Mrs. Bannan coughed again, with explosive force, then, advancing a step further, placed one

puissant fist upon the table, swung her bulk forward, and sounded the onset:

"Getting waited on all right?"

Amy looked up at the landlady's looming bulk, glanced anxiously at Michaelson, who wore a frown of annoyance, then forced a smile. "Yes, thanks," she said. There was an ominous silence, which Mrs. Bannan made no move to break. "I want you to meet my friend, Mr. Michaelson," said the girl. "Mr. Michaelson, this is our landlady, Mrs. Bannan."

Michaelson rose, and bowed profoundly.

"'Tain't much of a dinner to-night, Mr. Michaelson," said the landlady, impressed by his easy courtesy. "Our ice cream man disappointed me, but if I'd known you were coming, I'd have fixed up something special for you."

"I'm enjoying my dinner very much," said Michaelson, with a smile and a glance in the direction of Miss LeRoy.

The matter-of-fact landlady glanced at his plate. "Why, you ain't had nothing yet," she exclaimed.

"No," he had to admit. He smiled and recovered. "But Miss LeRoy has recommended your table so highly that I'm sure to be pleased."

Mrs. Bannan cracked an ogreish smile. "Well, if I do say it myself, I give my boarders the very best there is." Mr. Michaelson smiled blandly. "For the price," she qualified.



"I GIVE MY BOARDERS THE VERY BEST THERE IS - FOR THE PRICE," SHE DECLARED

"Sit down, Mr. Michaelson," Amy broke in petulantly. "No use wasting your manners in a boarding house."

"Yes, don't let me keep you from your eating," said the landlady, as the black girl brought on the roast beef. "Do you like your meat rare, Mr. Michaelson? Them is awful small portions, Lucy." She turned again to Michaelson with a smile as nearly gracious as her peculiar limitations allowed. "But, if you want another helping, you can have it," she said. "I never deny my people anything." She sighed deeply. "Meat is terribly high now, too. My butcher bill is something awful." Michaelson nodded so sympathetically that the ogre beamed. "Maybe you'd like something to drink with your dinner."

"What have you got?" asked Amy.

The landlady glanced stealthily down the room. "I can let you have some beer," she said. "It belongs to Mr. Phelps," she added in a lower voice. "We keep it on the ice for him, but he won't care."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Bannan," said Michaelson. "I'm quite happy with what I have."

"Well," said the landlady, "if you want anything, don't be afraid to shout for it."

And she returned unto her own place, where she retailed at length to Leitz and to Miss Dunstan her impressions of Mr. Michaelson, summing them all up in this final judgment:

"And he's a perfect gentleman."

Which goes to show how easily a giantess may be led, or misled, on the frail string of courtesy. Leitz, who had not passed within the field of Michaelson's magnetic manner, remained unconvinced.

"I bet he shaves himself," said the barber.

It was the bitterness of envy, perhaps, that sharpened Miss Dunstan's tones as she passed Michaelson by for the girl. "She ought to have better sense than to bring him right here in front of our noses," she sneered. "A girl can't be too careful if she wants to keep her reputation."

If Mrs. Bannan could have followed the conversation at the little table, she might have repented of her judgment.

"That's the worst of living in a boarding house," Amy was saying apologetically, as the landlady moved away. "You have to be nice to everybody."

"I don't see how you can stand it," assented Michaelson, who was beginning to plan a quick getaway.

"Ain't it awful?" said the girl. There was a wistful look in the big, baby eyes that gazed so helplessly into his. "But what's a girl to do on a small salary?"

Michaelson leaned towards her. "You might let your friends help you," he said softly.

There was a dead pause. The girl's eyes sought her plate.

"I can't afford to get myself talked about," she objected feebly.

"Nobody would know," he whispered.

There was a swift interchange of glances across the remnants of the roast beef. For the space of a second their eyes held each other's. In that moment a bargain was struck. Joe Weinstein could have drawn up contract without consulting either party to the transaction.

The man's eyes glowed. The girl struck at him playfully. "Now, Jimmy, stop," she purred. "I'm not that kind of a girl," which served to confirm Jimmy's knowledge of just what kind of a girl she was, and caused him to smile contentedly.

There was a stir in the room as a shrill whistle sounded in the area. Miss Dunstan jumped to her feet.

"Oh, there's the postman," she cried. "And I've been expecting a letter."

She hastened towards the window, but Amy, who had the advantage of position, was there before her. The girl ran up the blind, threw open the window, and took the handful of letters which the postman thrust through the grating. She closed the window slowly, pulled down the blind, and, reading as she walked, returned to her chair, where she continued to go through the letters with a deliberation that

seemed to be in the highest degree exasperating to Miss Dunstan, who was jumping from one foot to the other in her impatience. The girl finally found an envelope addressed to herself, and calmly laid the others down on the table beside her.

"I know who that's from," she said to Michaelson. "Will you excuse me if I read it at the table?"

"Go ahead," nodded Michaelson.

Miss Dunstan waved her arms angrily toward the unconscious reader. "Can you beat that for nerve?" she cried. With clenched hands she rushed to the little table and, with a sarcastic "Excuse me" to the startled Michaelson, scooped up the letters and beat a retreat.

"Any for me?" asked Weinstein.

"For Mrs. Bannan, most of them," she replied, as she undertook the task of distribution. The landlady threw up her hands in stony despair.

"I don't know how I'm ever going to pay 'em," she wailed.

"Mr. Wilson," continued Miss Dunstan, making the round of the table. Tom thrust his letter into his pocket without looking at it. "Mr. Merkle. And here's one for me. The rest are all for Mrs. Bannan."

The landlady handed her letters over to Leitz. "Put them on my desk, dearie," she said wearily. "I can't read without my glasses."

A shriek from Miss Dunstan. "Do you know where mine is from? K. & E. They're going to try my voice to-morrow, and I haven't practiced all day." She broke off into a shrill arpeggio. "Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah" she screamed up the register, dancing sidewise, and "Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah" she screamed down again, dancing back. At the top note, Merkle clapped his hands to his ears. "Is anybody in the parlor?"

"If it's all the same to you, Miss Dunstan," said Merkle, in his most reasonable tones, "I wish you wouldn't pound the piano to-night. I have the back parlor, you know, and I have a lot of work to do."

She faced him, quivering with excitement. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Merkle," she said. "It isn't my fault if you have the back parlor. The front parlor is intended for the guests, and I have a perfect right to use the piano if I want to. My music means a good deal to me, and I don't see why you should object to it." And she stamped away.

"I don't object"—she wheeled swiftly—"to music," he growled.

Her lip trembled. "You're the rudest man I ever saw," she exclaimed.

"Glad you have me classified," said Merkle.

She turned to Joe for comfort. "Do you object to my music, Mr. Weinstein?"

"No. Holler your head off, sweetheart," replied Joe cheerfully.

"And Mr. Weinstein ought to know," she cried. "He's in the business." And tucking this consolation under her arm, she ran quickly up the stairs. Joe turned to Merkle with a grin.

"Better get your room changed, Merkle," he counseled.

"It's bad enough to have that beer garden across the street without having her pound the ivories all night," grumbled his friend.

Joe rose to his feet with a laugh. "Well," said he, "me for the white lights. Don't take any wooden coin, folks, and remember, it's just as pleasant in the Summer as it is in the city." With which cryptic advice, he betook himself to the street by way of the area.

Tom Wilson sat dejectedly in his seat, his dinner almost untasted. He turned with a blank stare when Lucy entered from the hall and spoke to him.

"Dar's a lady in de parlor to see you, Mr. Wilson," she repeated.

Tom rose quickly. "To see me," he exclaimed, and hastened from the room.

Amy's quick ears had caught the black girl's message. She formulated her plan of action instantly.

"What time is it, Jimmy?" she inquired.

"A quarter after seven," he replied, looking at his watch.

She jumped to her feet. "Gracious," she cried. "I'll be late for the half-hour, and our stage manager is awfully strict. Let's go."

"I'll take you to the show shop," he offered.

She laid her hand on his. "No," she pleaded, "they might talk about us. Let them see you leave the house alone, and you can come and get me after the show."

"Sure now," said Michaelson, as they walked towards the door.

"I'll wait for you," she assured him. "Only, don't be long."

Michaelson lingered at the door. "Good night, Mrs. Bannan," he called pleasantly.

"Good night," she cried, as he climbed the stairs after Amy. "Come again, Mr. Michaelson. I'll have a better meal for you next time."

Leitz, at the landlady's reminder, gathered her letters together, and, hanging them to his side, started for the door. Merkle rose, and, taking a small roll of bills from his pocket, walked up to Mrs. Bannan. "Here's something for you," he said.

"'Tain't due till to-morrow," she observed, having first, however, closed her massive fingers about the money.

"I might not have it to-morrow," he replied with a crusty smile.

A rhythmic jangling sounded above their heads. A shrill soprano added itself presently to the discord. Miss Dunstan had gone into training for tomorrow's try-out.

"My goodness, Mr. Merkle," the landlady was saying, "if all my people were as prompt pay as you, I'd be a happy woman."

Merkle's eyes twinkled. "Want to do something for me?" he said.

"Change your room?" she asked, with a look aloft.

"No. Put a sign on the piano: 'Out of order.'"

"I'll make her stop as soon as I go up," she promised.

Merkle climbed the stairs. The landlady was left alone. She yawned cavernously and began to turn out the lights. "Lu-cee," she called.

The black girl came in from the kitchen and stood at attention. "Yas'm," she said.

"Clear everything away. Save the rest of that roast beef for lunch to-mor-ow."

"Yas'm."

"And, Lu-cee. Don't forget to put the lock on the icebox, so the beer will be safe."

She yawned again, more widely and deeply than before, and moved towards the door.

"Mrs. Bannan," said the black. The landlady

turned on the threshold. "What shall I do if the ice cream comes?"

Mrs. Bannan strangled a third yawn in its lusty infancy. A glad and crafty smile extended itself across her visage.

"I didn't order no ice cream," she said.

CHAPTER XIII

UNEXPECTED MEETINGS

THE "lady in the parlor" rose from the dark corner where she had been seated and came forward into the center of the room.

"Jane!" exclaimed Tom joyously. He rushed forward and seized both her hands and shook them as though he meant never to stop. It was good to see Jane, to feel her firm clasp, to look into her calm, brown eyes again, to see her untroubled smile. It made Tom forget the anxieties that beset him. In her simple frock of some soft, white fabric, she looked deliciously cool and dainty. His wilted soul and body revived in her presence. She was like a refreshing breeze at the fag-end of a hot day. For the moment he was back in Fairview, and he plied her with questions, about herself, about his mother, about everybody in the village, not forgetting his old friend, Judge Belknap. Jane stood smiling and waiting for the torrent of interrogatories to run dry.

Just how long Tom stood holding her hands there in the dim parlor, there is no means of determining. Certainly Jane made no effort to loose them, until a sharp swish of silk at the door and an

apologetic "Oh!" caused her to withdraw them quickly and step back. The young woman, who had made as if to enter the parlor, drew back so swiftly that Jane caught only the flash of a blue skirt as its owner vanished down the hall. But Tom had recognized the voice, and he experienced a momentary feeling of discomfort.

It was not that Tom had anything to reproach himself with. So far as Tom was concerned, his companionship with Amy LeRoy possessed no element of significance of which Jane might not be fully informed. He had naturally gravitated towards Amy among all his fellow boarders, because she had appealed to his sympathies, she seemed so helpless and childish out of place in the Bannan boarding house; because she had made it prettily apparent that she liked his company; because he had thought he detected a certain hard unfriendliness towards her on the part of the other women in the house, and his ready spirit of chivalry had been roused in her behalf; and — underlying reason of all, perhaps — because they both were young, Tom, in everything except years, much the younger of the two.

Tom's momentary embarrassment proceeded out of no feeling of liability — he had never for an instant lapsed from his loyalty to Jane — but he had an uncomfortable feeling that somehow Jane, with her country ways of thinking and her unavoidably

narrow horizon, would not look with favor on a music hall "broiler" like Amy. He rather hoped it would not be necessary for them to meet.

As for Amy, her curiosity about "the lady in the parlor" would have been more difficult to explain in a manner satisfactory to that village-bred damsel. Amy had not the slightest thought of relinquishing her newly acquired interest in Jimmy Michaelson. Privately she would have laughed at such an idea as ridiculous. Jimmy had cost her too much trouble to get. But she liked Tom immensely, he was so strong and handsome, and, just at present, she didn't want him to like anybody else too much. Tom, in his unsophisticated frankness, had told her of Jane, but the "broiler" did not much fear the rivalry of a country girl, especially when that girl was several hundred miles away. Tom appealed to a side of her nature that latterly she had found very little use for. Even in musical comedy, a girl may retain a desire to possess a male acquaintance who treats her "with respect."

There were other interruptions, accidental or otherwise, culminating with the incursion of Miss Dunstan, armed with a roll of music and still breathing threatenings and slaughter, who plumped herself down at the decrepit piano and proceeded to shatter the patient atmosphere. Ordinarily Miss Dunstan would have been more lenient, for she liked Tom and would gladly have seen him rescued from

the clutches of that LeRoy girl, but to-night she was so full of wrath and purpose that it is doubtful if she noticed the figures in the far corner.

Tom and Jane sat without quailing while Miss Dunstan screamed her way through the ditty with which she purposed to charm the syndicated ears of K. & E. on the morrow. When she drew a long breath and began the song afresh, with the evident purpose of screaming it all over again, Jane moved uneasily, as if she were beginning to think it time to be going, and Tom hastily proposed an adjournment to the deserted dining room below.

"Come on, Jane," he entreated. "You might as well stay a little longer, now that you're here," and led the way below, where they found Lucy removing the last of the dinner fragments, still shaking her head in admiration at her mistress's ice cream coup.

Tom led Jane to the little table by the window and pointed to the chair lately occupied so successfully by Mr. Jimmy Michaelson. He took Amy's chair for himself, but in an informal manner, which Amy could never have negotiated except in her musical comedy costume — the manner of children who "play horse." Having thus seated himself in reverse, he crossed his arms on the back of his chair, laid his chin on his arms, and gazed long and delightedly at Jane.

"Well," he said, "I certainly am surprised to see

you. So you're the lady who wanted me on the telephone? I couldn't imagine who it was. When did you come to town?"

Jane hesitated an instant. "A few days ago," she said.

Tom straightened up. "Why didn't you let me know?" he cried.

"I couldn't," the girl explained. "Cousin Emily had me on the go every minute." There was a wrinkle of perplexity between Tom's eyes. "You know how it is when one spends a few days with relatives," she went on.

"A few days," Tom repeated slowly. "When are you going back?"

"To-morrow morning," answered Jane. "Dad had some business in town and I persuaded him to let me come along. He finished up quicker than I expected, though."

Tom considered. There was more to this than appeared on the surface. He had a canny notion that Judge Belknap was concealed somewhere near the bottom. He rose from his chair and walked up and down in front of Jane.

"That's too bad," he said. "I won't have a chance to show you 'round." He stopped and looked at her with sudden anxiety. "And mother? Did you see her before you left?"

"Yes," said Jane. "I promised her that I wouldn't leave town without seeing you."

Perhaps Jane wouldn't have come at all, otherwise, Tom couldn't help thinking. "And how is she looking?" he pursued. "All right?"

"Very well, indeed, I thought."

"Guess mother thinks I'm in trouble every minute down here," said Tom, with a short laugh.

"Doesn't she?"

Jane's eyes looked away from him to follow Lucy, who, her task finished, was shuffling out into the kitchen with her heavy tray. As the door swung to behind the black girl, Jane asked:

"Aren't you in any trouble?"

Tom straddled his chair again, brought his face down to a level with Jane's, and invited inspection.

"Do I look as if I were?" he asked with a confident smile.

Jane looked, but did not respond to smile or question. "We heard that you had lost your position," she said.

"Ah!" said Tom straightening himself up again more quickly than before. "Where did you hear that?"

"Mr. Kennedy wrote Dad about it. They're old friends, you know."

"Oh!" said Tom, thoughtfully. "And I suppose your Dad lost no time telling my mother," he said, with the suspicion of a sneer.

Jane's tone rebuked him. "He felt that it was his duty to tell her," she replied.

Tom spurned his chair from him. "I wish he wouldn't always do these things," he said hotly. "He had't any right to trouble my mother about this."

"Why?" persisted Jane. "Isn't it true?"

"Suppose it is. Can't a fellow lose a job without having it advertised as a tragedy?" He faced her defiantly. "I'm not worried about it," he declared. "Why should they be?"

Jane's face grew graver. "It isn't the loss of the position," she said, "but the reason for losing it that worries them."

"Did Kennedy give any particular reason for letting me go?" inquired Tom.

"He mentioned neglect and —" Jane hesitated painfully — "and bad habits," she finished.

Tom did not suspect what she had in mind. He was conscious of no glaring scandals in his conduct.

"That's it," he jeered. "Just because a fellow goes out for a good time once in a while, he's acquiring bad habits. I'm glad I'm out of that place, anyway. Now I have a chance to look for something big."

"You have always been looking for something big, Tom," Jane reminded him.

"Yes, and I'll find it, too," he retorted. "Bad luck can't stick to me forever."

Jane looked at him sadly. "Something big!"

again. And "Bad luck!" The words struck a chill to her heart. Her mind flew back to the scene in the Fairview home, seven months before. Tom was the same irresponsible boy that he had been then. Experience had taught him nothing. "Bad luck" was still his sufficient excuse for failure. She had sent him forth into the world of men and women "to find himself," to make good, and then come back to her. Could it be that her brave experiment had failed because there was nothing for Tom to find?

The voice of Mrs. Bannan, calling from the head of the stairs, rose stridently clear of the muffled clangor from the closed parlor. "You down there, Mr. Wilson?" she cried.

"Hello," Tom answered.

"Here's a gentleman to see you," shrieked the landlady.

"To see me?" echoed Tom. He glanced at Jane. There was something in her face that he did not fathom. "Oh!" he said, with a flash of illumination. "It's your Dad."

He walked towards the door. The Judge's legs came into view through the top of the door as he made his way slowly down the stairs in the hall. Tom went forward to greet him. "Come right down, Judge Belknap," he cried. "Jane's down here."

The Judge halted in the door. Tom extended

a hospitable hand. "Welcome to our little city," he cried. "How are you?"

The Judge bowed distantly, ignoring the proffered hand shake. "I'm very well, thank you," he said frigidly. Jane intervened.

"Hello, Dad," she cried. "Got through with your business?"

"I've found all I wanted to know," he growled.

Tom beamed on his visitor. The Judge's occasional displays of offended dignity had always appealed mightily to a certain spirit of boyish perversity in Tom. "It's bully of you to come to see me," he said. "I appreciate it, all right." He lugged up another chair. "Sit down," he begged.

"This is not a social call," said the Judge, stiffly on his guard. He was never quite certain what the boy intended when he assumed this tone, but experience bade him beware.

"Well," said Tom cheerfully, placing the chair before him, "sit down anyway."

The Judge shied at the chair like a wise old bear at a steel trap. "I've just come from seeing Dick Kennedy," he announced portentously.

"Why," said Tom, with bland surprise. "I'm not with him any more."

"So I understand," said Belknap, biting the words off savagely.

"What did he have to say?" inquired Tom, more blandly still. Jane moved uneasily in her chair.

"Nothing that I did not already know," growled the Judge. He turned abruptly to Jane. "Have you had your talk?" he demanded.

"Not — not about that," she faltered.

"I wish you'd let me in on this, if it's about myself," interposed Tom. The Judge eyed him earnestly.

"Do you remember the conditions under which you left Fairview?" he asked.

"Perfectly," said Tom. "Why?"

"I mean so far as they concerned your engagement to my daughter," persisted Belknap.

"Yes," replied Tom, "but I haven't had much time to make good yet."

The Judge favored his auditors with a glimpse of his most impressive manner. "Your conduct during the short time you have been here has rendered further consideration of the matter impossible," he said.

Tom became suddenly serious. "I wish you'd make that clear," said he.

"I'll speak plainly, then," said the Judge.

Jane rose from her seat by the little table. "I'll wait upstairs, Dad," she said, and walked towards the door. The Judge motioned her back to her chair.

"Don't go, Jane," he commanded. "I want you to hear all that is said." He wheeled suddenly on Tom, who was standing in bewildered silence, un-

able to imagine what all this pother might be about, and shot this question at him:

"Do you know a Miss LeRoy?"

The utter unexpectedness of the attack staggered Tom.

"Yes," he replied, after a moment.

"She's an actress, isn't she?" was the Judge's next query.

In the interests of truth and accuracy, Tom hesitated again. "Well," he qualified, "she's on the stage. Yes."

The Judge, who had some reputation as a rough-and-tumble cross-examiner to sustain, noted Tom's hesitations, promptly misinterpreted them to fit his case, after the manner of cross-examiners, and turned to his daughter with a sarcastic smile, as though asking the jury not to fail to take account of the witness's inability to escape the truth.

"What are your relations?" was the next searcher.

"Very pleasant," replied the witness, who had by this time regained his composure. "She's a nice little girl. Do you know her?"

The Judge flushed angrily at this turning of the worm. "No, sir," he bellowed. "I do not, sir."

"Then why these questions?" demanded the worm. The Judge laid a firm grasp on his temper and took a fresh start.

"Do you deny that you have been spending your

time and money on this woman?" he thundered. The jury leaned eagerly forward.

"I haven't had any money to spend," was the reply, "but I've escorted her to the theater once or twice. Is there any harm in that?"

The jury breathed a sigh of relief. The baffled cross-examiner sneered.

"You can't deceive me by trying to make light of it," he said. "I have a record of your conduct ever since you came to New York. Kennedy attended to that for me."

"Oh, I see," said Tom, indignantly. "You've had Kennedy play the spy on me."

The Judge's flush deepened. "I had a perfect right to know what you were doing," he roared.

"I'd have told you if you'd have asked me," retorted the angry youth.

The Judge fell back on the tricks of his trade. "Then you admit that it is all true?" he demanded, with another glance at Jane.

"No," said Tom hotly, "I don't, but, if you've already made up your mind, what's the use of my saying anything?"

"I want Jane to be satisfied," said Belknap.

Tom turned his back on his annoyer. "What do you want to know, Jane?" he said.

"Only what you want to tell me, Tom," replied the girl. There was a frank appeal in the youth's voice that touched her, a note of sadness, too, at her

mistrust. Jane had never accepted her father's revelations at their face value. She knew Tom wouldn't lie to her. She rose to her feet as Tom approached.

"There's nothing to tell," said Tom. He stood very near and gazed into her eyes with compelling candor. "I've been a bit of a fool in giving Kennedy a chance to fire me, but I've done nothing to be ashamed of. Do you believe that?"

"Yes, Tom," said the girl, laying her hands in his.

Tom swung joyously on his heel to face the Judge.

"You see, that's all there's to it," he cried.

"Bosh," snorted the infuriated Judge.

"No, Dad," said Jane, firmly. "I don't think that Mr. Kennedy likes Tom. That's why he said those things." And her face settled into that calm, decided expression, which her father, in his moments of disappointment was tempted to characterize as obstinacy. He gazed at her furiously, Tom smilingly, his triumph seemed complete. For a space all three were silent.

"To-om. Oh, To-o-om."

A girl's voice rang with silvery distinctness through the upper regions of the house. It prolonged itself and hung each time upon the name with sweet familiarity and died away in a caressing cadence.

The effect upon the group below was startling. Each figure stiffened instantly into an attitude of strained attention, and the three stood there like so many wax figures — listening.

“To-om. Where are you-ou?”

The voice was nearer now, and its endearment more unmistakable. The group stirred itself. Tom turned to Jane with an open-mouthed stare. The Judge relaxed into a sarcastic grin. Jane was the first to speak. She was pale, and her voice was flat and colorless.

“Somebody is calling you,” she said.

Tom recovered himself with a gasp. “Excuse me a moment,” he said, and hastened towards the door.

Too late! Even as he spoke there was a tapping of small heels on the stairs, and a moment later Amy LeRoy stood in the doorway and confronted Tom with an impatient little stamp of the foot.

CHAPTER XIV

THE VERDICT

AMY laid her hand on Tom's arm with a pretty air of proprietorship. "Why didn't you answer me?" she pouted. "I've been calling all over the house for you." She peered into the room and started back with an air of sweet confusion.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know that you were with anybody."

It seemed natural enough she shouldn't, for the fact wasn't strikingly obvious at the moment. The Belknaps had retreated into the corner by the window and were exhibiting an air of conscientious detachment which might well have indicated that, so far as they were aware, they were the only persons in the room.

But Amy LeRoy was not to be snubbed so easily — not by a girl from the hayseed belt, anyhow. She had spent some careful minutes before her mirror, solely for Jane's benefit, and she was unwilling to lose her labor. She had on her very smartest blue gown, and her most effective blue hat, and her most dazzling complexion, and such diamonds as she had been able to store up during her short foot-light career were most artfully displayed. Framed

in the dark doorway, she made a striking picture under the gaslight, and she knew it and was determined that the village maiden should be enlightened also.

She signaled her determination to Tom with an importunate toss of her head towards Jane and a stubborn little frown in his own direction. Then she stood calmly waiting. The embarrassed youth could not evade her. He coughed feebly.

"Amy," he began, "I want you to know Miss Belknap. You've heard me speak of her. Also her father, Judge Belknap." The Belknaps moved a short step forward. Tom bowed elaborately.

"This is Miss LeRoy," he announced.

Amy held her pose in the doorway just long enough to make sure that the picture should not be lost on the villagers, then moved swiftly upon Jane, with hands outstretched and rapturous welcome shining in her eyes. A patronizing nod, bestowed in passing, was the Judge's portion.

Jane stood until Amy's arms were within easy embracing distance, then stepped neatly out of range and bowed stiffly.

"How do you do, Miss LeRoy?" she said.

Amy checked her demonstrative rush just in time to preserve her balance. If she was offended at the rebuff, no hint of irritation was suffered to show itself in her face.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, in honeyed tones. "You're from the country, aren't you?" and left

it to Jane to guess whether this raillery was directed to her rustic manners or to her dress, which Miss LeRoy had analyzed at a glance. "Tom talks about you so much that I almost feel as if I knew you." She turned to that unhappy youth.

"I didn't mean to butt in, Tom," she said. "I thought, of course, you knew I was waiting. If I'd known you were engaged, I'd have run right along."

"I'd forgotten all about it," said Tom, truthfully enough.

"Well!" she cried, stirred to sudden wrath, not so much by his words as on account of a glimmer she fancied she saw in Jane's eye. "You better wake up. I can't expect them to hold the curtain for me while you entertain."

"You'd better not wait for me then," said Tom, apathetically. "I'll see you to-morrow."

"Don't let us detain you," Jane broke in. "We must be going, anyway."

"Oh, no," protested Amy. "Don't let me break up the party." She nodded a pert good-bye to the Judge. "I can find my way alone."

She tripped to the door, and turned there. "You needn't come for me to-night," she cried to Tom. As she ran up the stairs she flung a parting shot over the bannister in mocking recitative. "I've got another en-ga-a-ge-ment," she chanted gaily. Then the front door slammed.

There was an awkward pause. The Judge's harsh voice cut the silence.

"So that's the girl, is it?" he sneered.

"That's Miss LeRoy. Yes," said Tom.

"You seem to be pretty well acquainted." The Judge strode up to Tom and shook an accusing finger under his nose. "What claim has she on you?" he demanded.

Tom's lips twitched. A quick flush mounted to his forehead. He was near the limit of his patience.

"Dad!" cried Jane. She flew to his side and grasped his outstretched arm.

"Be quiet, Jane," he commanded, thrusting her aside. He returned to Tom. "Answer my question," he roared.

"You haven't any right to speak to me like that," said Tom. He spoke very quietly.

"I am speaking for my daughter," cried Belknap.

Tom rammed his hands deep in his pockets and turned away with a disdainful shrug. "Jane wouldn't stoop to ask such a question," he said.

"Please don't say any more, Dad," begged the girl. "Can't you see the position you are placing him in?"

"I'm going to get at the truth of this thing, here and now," shouted the Judge, whose temper was rapidly disintegrating under the combined shocks of Tom's contemptuous manner and Jane's persistent

interference. "What claim has this girl on you?" he roared again.

Tom looked at Jane out of the corner of his eye before he decided to answer. "No claim," he said shortly. "We're very good friends. That's all."

"I don't believe it," shouted Belknap.

"Then," said Tom, "there isn't any use of my saying anything more."

"If you don't," bellowed the Judge, "we will be justified in forming our own conclusions."

"You seem to have done that already," retorted Tom.

For the moment the Judge's wrath choked him. Jane hastened to his side.

"Father — please," she pleaded.

Belknap pulled himself together. "I can't expect you to understand, Jane," he said, "but I've seen that type of woman before." He turned to Tom and his voice rose again. "And I know," he continued, "what such friendship means."

"Now, hold on, Judge Belknap." Tom's voice cracked like a whip. "You may say anything to me that you please, but — I shan't allow you to insult Miss LeRoy."

The Judge blinked in astonishment at this fresh audacity.

"Are you in love with her?" he asked.

"You know that I'm not."

"Then why constitute yourself her champion?"

"I'd defend any woman who wasn't here to speak for herself." Tom walked up to the Judge and looked him in the eye at short range. He spoke very deliberately, measuring the effect of every word as it left his lips. "Just because Miss LeRoy happens to be on the stage," he said, "it doesn't give you the right to throw mud at her. I know her — and you don't, and she's just as good and pure as any girl I know."

For a brief space the two glared at each other. Then the Judge's lip curled and he turned away.

"I don't think we need discuss this subject any further," he said, with bitter emphasis. "We understand each other, I think." Half way to the door he stopped.

"From now on, you can do anything you please." He passed out. "Come, Jane," he called, and continued up the stairs.

Tom gazed at the girl in mute appeal from the Judge's decision. She hesitated, almost imperceptibly, then started to follow her father. Tom put himself in her path.

"Do you agree to that, Jane?"

"If you remember, Tom —" something hard rose in her throat, but she gulped it down — "If you remember, I told you that you were perfectly free to choose."

"But this is all nonsense," he cried. "I haven't done a thing except to lose my job."

Jane's lips quivered. She fixed her eyes on the wall beyond. Through the mist that dimmed them, glimmered and danced a vision, all in brilliant blue, framed in the dark doorway. Amy's picture had not been lost. The trembling lips drew together into a colorless line.

"Jane." Her father's voice rasped impatiently from the landing above.

Jane's lips parted numbly. "I'm afraid—" she panted in a hoarse whisper, and stopped short, seeking for words and tones which should disguise her jealousy and cover up a strange, sudden weakness which shamed her before Tom. When she spoke again, her voice rang in her ears with a curious, conventional coldness.

"I'm afraid," she repeated, "that you still lack — character."

She moved forward. Tom stepped aside.

"Listen, Jane," he cried despairingly. "If you leave me like this, I won't be responsible for what I do."

She hesitated once again, and again her father's summons sounded. Now she had left the room, and Tom could hear each footfall as she slowly mounted the stairs.

He fell into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

"Very well, if that's the way you want it to be," he murmured brokenly.

CHAPTER XV

MISS DUNSTAN'S WATERLOO

ALONE in New York without a dollar! Three weeks more had brought Tom Wilson to this sorry pass. He had reached the end of his tether, almost the end of his hopes.

It had not been for lack of courage and effort. Tom had tried hard—tried everything. He had haunted employment agencies. Daily he pored through the "want" pages of the *World* and other newspapers. Columns upon columns of opportunities were there for men trained in some special line of work; nothing at all, it seemed, for the man who was willing to do anything. The one thing Tom could do well was to run an automobile, and he sought diligently for work of that sort. But it was the dull season for the taxicab companies and the owners of luxurious private cars were in Europe, or touring the country. Besides, there were difficulties about licenses and references that proved insurmountable.

He woke one day to find himself without carfare or the price of a newspaper. He had fallen further and further in arrears with his landlady, and eviction and park benches were staring him in the face.

He had kept away from the boarding house as much as he could of late, appearing only for meals and slinking in late at night to avoid Mrs. Bannan's hostile glare, which followed each mouthful as it disappeared. He went about with a furtive look, as though he had been guilty of some crime. To be without money in New York is a crime — they send you to The Island.

He walked the streets at night, past gorgeous restaurants, where the price of a meal for two would have squared him for a month with Mrs. Bannan. He fell to studying the streams of faces. The gay, the thoughtless, the contented — they had money, but they seemed a small minority. He saw more like himself, troubled, anxious, desperate, and he set it all down to empty pockets. He was wrong, of course, in most cases, but it was the natural mistake of youth to translate the complex expression of the woes of a great city into the terms of his own wretchedness and inexperience. He fell at last into a condition of reckless despair. There seemed no chance for him, and, although he did not give up trying, he almost ceased to expect anything but rebuffs and failure.

As for Jane — he tried not to think of her. There was nothing that could be done. Besides, a more pressing problem worried him. His shoes were wearing out. They had become broken and shapeless and altogether disreputable. When he entered

an office or a shop, it was necessary to get them out of sight, if possible. Nobody would hire a man who wore such shoes.

It was characteristic of Tom's sense of justice that he did not think of blaming Amy for what had occurred. He had no notion of the adroit manœuvre by which she had succeeded in placing him at a disadvantage with Jane. Such feminine wiles were entirely outside the scope of his Fairview experience. It was surely an unlucky chance that had brought Amy upon the scene so inopportunately. Even at that, Tom did not realize how mischievous her appearance had been, how much it had to do with Jane's decision. He and Amy were better friends than ever. He was still her guardian and protector. She was the only being in New York who seemed to place any value upon his services. To her he was still able to be of use.

He had seen nothing further of Jimmy Michaelson. Amy had easily been able to manage that.

One night — it was the night of the day on which Tom's shoe burst clear across the upper — there was an unusual illumination in the parlor of the Bannan boarding house. The big landlady was absent, having at Leitz's solicitation, accompanied him to the roof garden, that she might satisfy herself with her own eyes as to the mooted ability of Miss LeRoy to buy diamonds out of her earnings as an actress. Miss Dunstan had taken advantage of this

opportunity to put in a solid evening of practice at the piano, where she pounded and shrieked with a deserving persistence. To her, thus engaged, entered Lucy, the colored maid, yawning and grumbling at the task which was keeping her out of her bed long after her hour.

This task was to prepare sleeping quarters for Tom Wilson. Tom had been moved again, to the station nearest the street door. His old-fashioned, wooden trunk was standing under the parlor window, and various of his most intimate personal belongings were heaped upon it or lay scattered on the floor where they had fallen when the mass had been dumped. In another corner stood his bed, a piece of furniture that paraded by daylight as a combination bookcase and writing desk.

Lucy gave the pillows a final pounding, then drew tight the strap which held the bedding in place during its hours of masquerade, and banged the bed shut. She went out into the hall and returned with a pitcher of water and a wash bowl, which she placed on top of the trunk, making room for them by pushing a few more of Tom's things off on to the floor. Then, with a sleepy glance about the room to see that everything had been done in accordance with the instructions of Mrs. Bannan, she began without a word to turn out the gas lights, first the chandelier, lastly the lamp that stood on the piano above Miss Dunstan's music.

The room was left in darkness, save for the dim rays which a distant street lamp sent through the windows. Miss Dunstan's music ended with a bang as she dropped both her hands on the keyboard. She jumped from the stool.

"What are you doing, Lucy?" she cried.

"Mrs. Bannan don't like no gas goin' after ten o'clock," answered the black girl sullenly.

"But I must have some light to see my music."

Lucy was unmoved. "Dem's de rules, Miss Dunstan," she said. "An' you know how she fusses when dey's broke."

"Seems to me I'm entitled to some consideration," snapped the blonde woman. "I pay my board regularly."

"Don't know nothin' 'bout dat," replied Lucy in stubborn tones. "I only knows what I'se told, and I was told to fix a place for Mr. Wilson to sleep here, and den put out de lights. Dat lets me out," and she turned to go.

The front door slammed loudly as Lucy delivered herself of this ultimatum. As she attempted to leave the parlor, the broad form of Joe Weinstein blocked the exit.

"What's the matter?" sang Joe, as he peered into the darkened parlor. "Is the house pulled?"

"Thank goodness, you've come," cried Miss Dunstan, hysterically. "Perhaps you can induce Lucy to go to bed and mind her own business."

Lucy sniffed loudly. "You don' s'pose I'se stayin' up to hear de loose stuff what you'se tearin' off o' dat ting?" she retorted.

Joe advanced into the room. "On your way, Salome," said he to the black girl. "You'll have to get breakfast for us in a little while. To the hay for yours."

"Dat's de way wid white folks," whimpered the girl. "Dey don' appreciate nothin' what you does."

Joe fumbled in his pocket and produced a coin. "Here," he said. "Go and buy yourself an automobile."

The black face was split by a wide grin. "'Course I didn't mean you, Mr. Weinstein," said Lucy. "If all de folks was like you —"

"I'm strong for that disrobing act," interrupted Joe. "So go to it, Salome. I'll fix it with mother." He struck a match on his trousers and, with great deliberation, relighted every jet in the chandelier.

"I hope you understan' my position," said the girl, backing to the door. "If Mrs. Bannan says anything to me for this, I'll quit her, flat." With which defiance of the absent tyrant she took herself away unto her own place.

Miss Dunstan, her courage restored by the example of Joe's, relighted the piano lamp and returned to her stool. "I'm glad to see somebody

with independence in this house," she snapped. "Does my music annoy you?"

"Not if it gives you pleasure, girly," said Weinstein. He produced another match, lighted the reading lamp on the small table under the chandelier, settled himself in an easy chair and unfolded a copy of the *Morning Telegraph* which he carried in his hand. He skimmed rapidly over the headlines of the theatrical and sporting stories that filled its first pages and turned to the tables of race-track performances in the rear. Miss Dunstan watched him.

"Play something sad," he said. "My feelings are hurt."

"Did somebody insult you?" inquired Miss Dunstan, with whom such a happening was of frequent occurrence.

"Naw," said Joe, disdainfully. "I got stung for all I had, to-night."

"Ain't that too bad?" she sympathized. "Would you like me to play the Barcarolle?"

Joe looked around with an expression of interest. It sounded so much like "bank-roll," as Miss Dunstan pronounced it. "Is that a gambling song?" he asked.

"It's from the Tales of Hoffman," explained the singer, in pity of his ignorance. "It's one of my favorites, and I think it's grand."

"The grander it is the better I'll like it," Joe

assured her. He settled himself to a study of the "dope" for the morrow's races, while she proceeded to soothe his troubled feelings with the magic of harmony. She had hardly got fairly started when Merkle burst into the room though the curtained door that led into the back parlor.

The newspaper man was a seedy looking object. He had left his bed in haste. He came in rubbing his eyes. He had thrust his legs into his trousers, his feet into a pair of slippers and wrapped a tattered dressing gown about his pajamas. His thick black hair stood upright, in two tumbled ridges along either side of his elongated bald spot, giving him a peculiarly Satanic appearance as he glared at the pianist.

"Is this an all night session?" he shouted. Miss Dunstan affected not to notice him. Weinstein glanced up drowsily from his *Morning Telegraph* and turned in his chair to face the intruder.

"Hello, Merkle," he said. "When did you get in?"

"I've been trying to sleep for half an hour," growled Merkle, keeping a ferocious eye on Miss Dunstan. "What does she think she's doing?" He walked across the room, leaned across the square-topped instrument and said:

"Excuse me, Miss Dunstan. Don't you think it's time to quit?"

Miss Dunstan clasped her hands with the sudden-

ness which, on the operatic stage, serves to denote extreme agitation. "How you startled me!" she gasped. "I was so wrapped up in the music that I almost imagined myself in Venice."

"Then," suggested Merkle, "perhaps it wouldn't require much effort on your part to call a gondola and paddle away."

She flared up at him. "I am playing this by special request," she cried.

"My request is also special," said Merkle. "Don't."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," she retorted angrily. She brought both hands down on the keyboard with every ounce of her weight behind them, and clawed away at top speed.

Merkle stood watching her for a few moments with a savage look in his eye, then stepped to the window and threw it open. Instantly the room was filled with appalling discord. From the beer garden across the way, propelled by the full power of the beer garden orchestra, the notes of "Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?" crashed into the room and grappled with the clanging "Barcarolle." The struggle was fierce while it lasted. Sharps and flats collided in midair and expired with a miserable clatter. The piano crackled like a machine gun under Miss Dunstan's heroic efforts.

Joe Weinstein leaped from his chair and pressed his hands to his tortured ears. Merkle seated him-

self nonchalantly on a corner of Tom's trunk, and, with a slight smile on his face, awaited the inevitable outcome.

It came with a final crash of the piano, in which Miss Dunstan concentrated the remnants of her strength and fury. She jumped from the stool, snatched up her music, and advanced upon the impassive figure by the window.

"Mr. Merkle," she shrieked, in tones which "Kelly's" utmost effort could not overwhelm, "I once referred to you as a gentleman. I shall apologize for my mistake. Good night, Mr. Weinstein." And she stamped out of the room.

Merkle watched her out with a wooden face. Then he fished a half smoked pipe from the pocket of the tattered dressing gown, lighted it, and puffed away with an air of calm satisfaction. Joe waved imploring hands towards the window.

"Gee, that's awful," he cried.

Merkle rose deliberately and drew down the window. "Desperate cases require desperate remedies," he quoted, resuming his perch on the trunk.

CHAPTER XVI

FRIDAY, THE THIRTEENTH

JOE WEINSTEIN returned to his seat and his study of probabilities. Merkle, who seemed in no great hurry to resume his quest of sleep, smoked for a time in brooding silence. His eye lighted on Joe's paper.

"That this evening's dope sheet?" he inquired.

"No," grunted Joe, sunk deep in his chair.

"To-morrow morning's *Telegraph*."

There was another depressing silence. Merkle searched his pocket in an absent manner for a match to relight his pipe, which had expired for lack of nursing. Not finding one, he rose to his feet with something between a yawn and a sigh.

"What kind of a night did you have, Joe?" he asked.

"Rotten," said Joe. He laid his paper across his knees and looked up. "Stung for all I had," he added.

"Broke?"

Joe nodded gloomily. "Serves me right," he said. "I should have gone into moving pictures when I had the chance."

"You seem to be running in hard luck lately,"

commented Merkle. "What's the matter with the show business, anyway?"

Joe rallied. "If I knew," he said, with a heroic attempt at his usual jesting manner, "I'd sell out to the syndicate."

Neither man smiled. Merkle began walking up and down the room, his hands clasped behind him, his eyes on the floor. An excursion longer than usual brought one of Tom's slippers into his field of vision. He halted and looked at it, then at the trunk by the window.

"Who's sleeping here to-night?" he asked.

"Wilson."

"Does he know it?"

"She handed him the big news at dinner," said Joe. "Likewise a P. S. to the effect that, if he didn't come across with a little loose change to-night, she'd have to slip him the raspberry." "Too bad," he added, after a sympathetic pause. "Seems a nice young fellow, but he's in wrong."

"How do you mean?"

"Figure it out for yourself," said Joe, with a lift of palms and eyebrows. "Kid from the country, small salary, chasing around with a dame who puts herself away for a Broadway queen." He picked up his paper. "Don't think there's anything wrong, myself," he said, "but ever since the night his friends called on him, he's been a different fellow."

"What night was that?"

"The night LeRoy blew in with the soup and fish. Don't you remember? About three weeks ago. The girl from his home town —"

Merkle's face lighted. "Oh, yes," he said, thoughtfully.

"She must have slipped him the exit sign," theorized Joe. "He's probably hanging around the corner now waiting for a chance to sneak in without the old lady seeing him." He rose suddenly to his feet. "Speaking of angels —" he said.

For the object of his irreverent characterization had suddenly thrown open the door and swooped in upon them, scarlet with rage. The giantess was in gaudy evening dress, and, to judge from the amount of blood visible in her upper works, her heart must have been pumped quite dry. Leitz trailed behind her.

"My God," she screamed, in tragic accents. "Every burner going and my gas bill is something awful." She reached for the chandelier, turning, as she did so, a menacing countenance on Weinstein and Merkle. "Who is responsible for this?" she demanded.

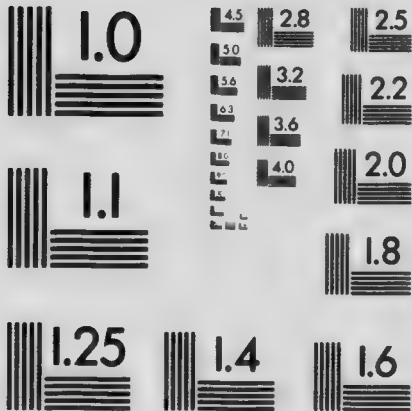
"'Tain't the dinge's fault, Mother," said Joe. "I told her I'd fix it with you."

Mrs. Bannan did not desist until she had extinguished every burner save that in the reading lamp. What with her wrath, her hurry and the



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tightness of her evening gown, she was puffing painfully.

"I can't even go out one night to enjoy myself without getting the worst of it," she complained, with her first spare breath. "And I get so few chances to see a little life."

"How'd you like the show?" asked Joe, soothingly.

"It wasn't bad," she conceded.

Joe winked at Merkle. "Thanks for them kind words," he said gratefully. But Mrs. Bannan had more glad tidings to impart.

"Miss LeRoy hasn't got no part at all," she announced with an air of great satisfaction, "and I didn't see one dress there as good as mine."

Joe's eyes wandered up and down over the billows of striped silk which encompassed her. "Who made your dress?" he asked, "The Fuller Construction Company?" Before she could arrive at his meaning, he added quickly: "Did you go to supper?"

"Oh, yes," she cried with enthusiasm, "Mr. Leitz took me to an awful swell place. We went to the Madrid."

"Oh," said Joe, with another wink at Merkle, "Leitz's always there with that highbrow stuff." Mrs. Bannan turned to her favorite.

"Run downstairs and get the beer, dearie," she said. "The key is under the icebox." Leitz dis-

appeared with alacrity. The landlady glanced around the room.

"Ain't Mr. Wilson come in yet?" she demanded.

"Haven't seen him," said Joe.

"Well, if you do, you tell him not to go to bed without letting me know, because I want to see him about something very important." She turned to the door. "Don't forget."

"We won't," said Weinstein.

The landlady placed her hands on her equator, one on either side, and squeezed mightily. "I got to go and make myself comfortable," said she. "Good night."

"Good night, Mother," said Joe. He watched her as she hoisted herself up the stairs by the aid of the creaking railing, then turned to Merkle, who had been standing aside without a word.

"Get that about the kid?" he asked.

Merkle nodded.

"I'd stake him if I had it," continued Joe. "I guess you would too."

"Sure," said Merkle.

They both turned towards the door as Leitz appeared from below with his arms full of beer bottles. The barber paused with a grin which invited greedy contemplation of his burden, then continued on up the stairs to the landlady's room.

"She's sitting up for him all right," said Joe,

taking envious note of the number of the bottles with which Mrs. Bannan would while away the time of waiting. He returned to his chair and his *Morning Telegraph*. "Well," he said, with a philosophic shrug, "it's none of our funeral," and resumed his study of the "dope." Merkle started for his bed with a yawn. "Good night, Joe," he said.

He had reached the door and placed his hand on the curtains, when a sharp rustle of Joe's paper and a loud exclamation caused him to look back. Joe was sitting bolt upright on the edge of his chair and staring at something in the paper as if he could not trust his eyes. He was breathing hard, and the hands which gripped the sheet were trembling with sudden excitement.

"What's the matter?" asked Merkle.

Joe did not seem to hear. He turned the page and stared at the other side with equal interest. Then his lips moved as if he were counting to himself. Reassured, apparently, by the result of his calculations, he threw down the paper, dived into his pocket and drew forth a few crumpled bills and some loose change, which he reckoned up with care. He shook his head over the total and turned suddenly to Merkle.

"How much have you got?" he demanded.

"Money?"

Joe nodded.

"Not much," said Merkle, ruefully.

"Look!" cried Joe.

Affected despite himself, by the contagion of Joe's mysterious excitement, Merkle probed his pockets. The search produced a total of twelve dollars and thirty-five cents.

Joe held out his hand. "Slip it to me," he said, eagerly.

"What for?"

"It's a hunch," exclaimed Joe. "I've been waiting for it for weeks, and it's just come."

"A hunch," jeered the newspaper man. He smiled the pitying smile of the seasoned gambler.

"What kind of a hunch?" he asked.

"Thirteen," said Joe.

Merkle stared at his friend as if he feared he were losing his reason. "Thirteen what?" he demanded.

"Just the number," said Joe. "It's been staring me in the face all night and I didn't see it." He thrust the paper before Merkle's eyes and pointed to the title line at the top of the page. "Look," he adjured him. "It's the thirteenth, and a Friday."

"But this is Thursday," Merkle reminded him.

"Look at your watch," cried Weinstein.

Just to convince Joe of his folly, Merkle produced his timepiece. As he glanced at the dial a

change came over his face. He held it up for Joe to see.

"Thirteen after twelve," he said, with a thrill in his deep voice that bespoke a sudden excitement he could not entirely suppress.

Joe was dancing around the room in his excitement. "You can't beat it, I tell you," he cried. "I've got nine and a half. Your twelve thirty-five makes it twenty something. I'll put it all on the thirteen." He entered upon a hasty calculation. "Thirty-five times twenty makes — Gee!" he broke off, "it's enough to start a moving picture show, and I know the dandiest little wheel in Forty-sixth street."

"Roulette?" exclaimed Merkle. He shoved his wealth back into his pocket. "Not with my money," he said, disdainfully.

"But," pleaded Joe, "we can make a little killing with that money, and —"

"Nay, nay," interrupted the older man, with a deprecating lift of the hand. "I was brought up on that game."

Joe laid beseeching hands upon him. "Come in while the hunch is warm," he pleaded. "They never fail, and this one's a pipe."

"I'd like to, Joe," said Merkle, "but it's my last."

"Can't get far on twelve bones," argued Joe.

"More than a week's board," retorted Merkle.

"Paying board don't get you anything," persisted Joe. The gambling fever had seized him and he would not be denied. "Come on," he begged, "take a chance."

Merkle wavered. "I'll split it," he said, willing to humor his friend.

Joe's eyes gleamed. "Don't be a piker," he urged. "All or nothing."

Merkle's half-hearted resistance collapsed at the injurious word. After all, what did it matter? Joe's hunch might win. He had known hunches that did. And —

"Oh, well —" he said, and dug down for his money.

Joe gave him no chance to change his mind. He grabbed the stake and added it to his own. "That's the talk!" he cried, enthusiastically. "We'll pull off the biggest win of the year. Just you watch." And he seized his hat from the table and sprang for the door. Merkle stopped him.

"Wait a minute," he said.

Joe clutched at the pocket which held the money in sudden alarm. "Don't renig," he cried.

"I'm not renigging," replied Merkle. He entered his room and returned in a moment with something in his hand which he extended to Joe.

"Here's another dime," he said.

Joe seized the coin. "Fine," he cried, admiringly. Joe loved a real sport when he saw him.

Merkle's eyes were sparkling with an unwonted lustre, but he affected an exaggerated concern as he saw Joe pocket his last visible means of support.

"If you don't win, God help you," he said, with mock solemnity.

As Joe darted into the hall, he almost ran over Tom Wilson in the darkness. "Hello, kid," he cried. "See you in a little while," and slammed the front door without waiting to apologize.

Tom, surprised at his abruptness, stopped in the doorway and started down the hall.

"What's the matter with Joe?" he asked.

With Joe's departure, Merkle's enthusiasm had suddenly gone dead.

"Nothing," he growled, with a gesture of disgust. "Just a hunch."

CHAPTER XVII

MERKLE MAKES CONVERSATION

TOM closed the door behind him and looked around the room as if in search of something.

"Thought I was to sleep here to-night," he said.

"You'll find all your stuff around here," replied Merkle, busy at a writing desk in the corner.

"Why not have some light?" demanded Tom, and went to work on the chandelier, unaware that it was the third illegal illumination of the evening that he was producing. Merkle meantime had found what he was after, a day-by-day desk calendar. He rapidly tore off the top sheet, till he had brought it up to date, then penciling a heavy black circle around the number 13, he propped the calendar up on top of the desk, walked to the center of the room and, his hands in his empty pockets, a whimsical smile on his face, turned to observe the effect. Tom, not understanding what this strange conduct might mean and too listless to inquire, approached his trunk and gazed ruefully at his scattered belongings.

"Wouldn't you think she'd have given me a chance to pack my own things?" he said, as much to himself as to his companion.

His words reminded Merkle of something. "Old lady said she wanted to see you to-night," he said to Tom.

"Guess I know what she wants," replied the youth, as he set to work to collect his things.

"Anything doing?" queried Merkle.

"She'll be disappointed," said Tom.

"Too bad," muttered Merkle. He seated himself beside the reading table and watched Tom keenly for a short while. "Your third change, isn't it?" he asked at last.

"Fifth," said Tom, working away. "From the fourth story back, all the way to the parlor. This is the last stop before hitting the sidewalk." He stood up and grinned at Merkle. "That's something to be thankful for," he said.

Merkle grunted his assent, but said nothing, though he liked the way Tom was taking . . . It was all bluff, he knew, but Merkle liked a good, game bluff above all things. From among the articles piled on the lid of his trunk, Tom extracted a bundle of photographs which he threw on the table near Merkle. Then he squirmed out of his coat and into his dressing gown and proceeded to arrange his toilet articles, making the top of his trunk do duty as a dressing table. Finally he retrieved his slippers, seated himself in the chair on the other side of the reading table, and began slowly to unlace his shoes.

"Where did you go to-night?" asked Merkle, who, for some reason of his own, seemed desirous of luring Tom into conversation.

"Down town," replied Tom absently.

"What did you see? Anything?"

"Didn't go to a show," replied Tom. "Just watched the crowds along Broadway."

Merkle had done the same thing under much the same circumstances and was therefore well able to imagine just what sort of a bitterly lonesome evening Tom must have spent among the gay throngs that scatter their foolish money up and down the Great White Way at night. But he was too wise to offer sympathy to Tom in the youth's present state of mind.

"Great sight, isn't it?" was all he said. He picked up one of the photographs that Tom had placed on the table and looked at it with interest.

"This your home?" he asked presently.

"Yes," said Tom. "Our cottage in Fairview."

Merkle put the photograph back on the heap. "Nice looking house," he said. "Who's living there now?"

"Just my mother."

"Um-m-m." Merkle's voice lingered long on the vocable. "Only you two in the family?" he drawled.

There was something in this speech that made Tom glance up quickly. It wasn't disapproval ex-

actly, it was too impersonal for that. It was rather a note of mild wonder, but it made Tom feel that he was somehow on the defensive in Merkle's thoughts, whatever those might be. Tom, who was not in a mood to endure criticism to-night, gazed sharply at the newspaper man, but Merkle's eyes were fixed vacantly on the wall opposite, and his face was bare of any definite expression. Tom returned to his struggle with a refractory knot in his shoestring.

"That's all," he answered quietly, but his impatience found vent in a quick tug that snapped the string. He examined the pieces carefully. They had been knotted several times, and it was a grave question what he should do for another string. Merkle's voice distracted his attention from this important economic problem.

"Wish I had a home like that," the newspaper man was saying. There was a wistful note in his deep voice that Tom had never heard there before. He would hardly have believed that Merkle was capable of emitting such a note. He gazed, curiously this time, at his cantankerous friend. Merkle had slumped back in his chair, like a man thoroughly wearied. He was still gazing fixedly before him, but his eyes were focused in a far away stare, as though he were looking right through the wall to something beyond from which he was unwilling to withdraw them. The shoe slipped from Tom's

hand and fell to the floor with an echoing crash. Merkle did not stir.

"What would you do with it?" Tom asked at last. The silence was getting on his nerves.

Merkle came out of his trance with a sharp shake of his head, like that which a fighter gives to clear his brain from the dizzying effect of a blow.

"Oh, I don't know," he answered, with a return to his usual harsh tones. Then, as if feeling that Tom's question, having naturally grown out of his own, was entitled to something further in the way of reply, he added: "But it's mighty fine to have some place to go to when things aren't breaking right."

Tom picked up the photograph in his turn, but threw it down again after a hasty glance. "I'm not in a frame of mind to appreciate anything to-night," he said, as if he rather resented Merkle's ability to do so under the borrowed inspiration of another man's photograph.

Merkle eyed him for a moment. "Anything gone wrong?" he asked.

"No," replied Tom. "Just depressed," and he shut his jaws secretively.

"That's a rotten feeling," said Merkle. Somehow he made Tom feel that he was speaking out of the fullness of experience. "What kind of work are you after?" he asked suddenly.

"Anything that will keep me going for a while," said Tom. "Know of anything?"

"Ever try journalism?" inquired Merkle.

"Once — for a Buffalo paper."

"I said JOURNALISM." Merkle, metropolitan to the core of his newspaper soul, shot forth the word with scornful emphasis.

"I'd last about two minutes," said Tom, hopelessly.

"Never can tell," said Merkle. "Some awful dubs get away with it in this town," he added, with a bitterness that had in it the concentrated essence of the disappointments of years. Tom was too much engrossed with his own troubles to notice, for which Merkle, suddenly bethinking himself, was grateful. He seldom let himself go so far.

"I'm willing to try anything with a salary attached," Tom was saying.

"Well," said Merkle, "we'll see what we can do." Tom shoved his feet into his slippers, picked up his shoes, and rose with a stifled yawn.

"See Miss LeRoy to-night?" asked Merkle suddenly.

"No," replied Tom with apparent indifference.

"I called at the theater to-night, but she had gone."

"Oh," said Merkle.

Tom yawned again, ostentatiously this time. "If the old lady wants to see me to-night, she'd better call quick," he observed.

The newspaper man ignored the hint. Instead of taking himself off, he settled himself more comfortably in his chair. "She'll be along as soon as she gets her theater rags off," he said. "She saw the show to-night," he added, with another rapid glance at Tom.

"Did she?" asked Tom, turning away carelessly.

"Yes," said Merkle. He waited for a moment for Tom to ask questions, but Tom, divining his purpose, would not ask. Merkle got up.

"I want to talk to you about her, kid," he said.

"About whom?"

"Miss LeRoy."

Tom turned quickly, but Merkle went on more quickly still, shutting off the youth's attempts to interrupt him. "Now wait a minute, son," he said. "I know what you're going to say. No, I know it's none of my business. But I'm a bit older than you and I've seen a lot more of the world than you have, so don't think I'm butting in just for the fun of the thing." Tom was silent perforce. "You're up against a hard proposition there," Merkle continued, "and I want to help you."

He stopped and looked at the boy as though inviting his confidence.

"I appreciate your kindness," said Tom stiffly.

"But I'm not in need of any help at present."

"Now don't get sore, son," said Merkle, placing his hand fatherwise on Tom's shoulder. "You're

only one among thousands of others who have come down here to this city with a heart full of love and sympathy for everybody in it, only to have it knocked out of you by a shallow, fickle, insincere woman, and this woman —" he paused and his hand dropped to his side —" this woman isn't worth it."

"Stop right there, Merkle," said Tom hotly, then checked himself. Merkle's friendly candor deserved something better than an angry rebuff. "I don't concede your right to advise me in this or any other matter." He stopped again, in spite of himself, at the hurt look in his friend's eyes, then went on again in a different tone.

"So far as Miss LeRoy is concerned," he said, "there is nothing you can tell me that I do not already know. She's been unfortunate, that's all, like a lot of other inexperienced girls that come to the city, but, there isn't anything in her life that she hasn't told me of herself."

Merkle stared at him. "She told you herself?" he repeated.

"Everything," said Tom, emphatically. "And you will oblige me by dropping the subject."

Merkle stood looking at him without making any reply. There were possibilities in Tom's declaration that needed turning over in his mind. Did Tom really know everything — about Jimmy Michaelson, for instance? Merkle didn't believe it, didn't want to believe it, at any rate. It was be-

yond nature that a girl of Amy LeRoy's type should tell everything, was his harsh reflection. And yet, there was nothing to be done. His shoulders rose slightly as he acknowledged his helplessness to himself.

"That lets me out," he said, half aloud. Then, to Tom:

"I'm sorry I offended you, old man."

"I'm not offended," said Tom, "only annoyed. You've simply voiced what every person in this house has been thinking for weeks, and it's unfair to her."

Merkle's face cleared suddenly at Tom's remark, and he extended his hand, which Tom grasped without being able to imagine just what had moved Merkle to offer it at this particular juncture.

"I hope you won't speak of it again," he said.

"I won't," said Merkle.

There was a loud knocking at the door that opened into the hallway. They both faced it with an expression of dismay.

CHAPTER XVIII

A LETTER FROM HOME

THE knocking was repeated, more vigorously than before. The landlady's voice added itself to the din. Evidently Mrs. Bannan was in no patient mood.

"You in there, Mr. Wilson?" she screamed through the panel.

"Just a minute," Tom responded.

"I'll get out," said Merkle, with a guilty grin at the flaring gas jets.

He walked slowly across the room towards his door, but stopped and turned before he reached it.

"Good night, son," he said, almost tenderly. He lingered a moment.

"Good night," said Tom. The newspaper man withdrew. Tom followed him to his door and drew the faded green portieres closely behind him. Then he walked over to the reverberating hall door, squaring his shoulders like one who is about to repel a physical assault.

"Come," he said.

The door flew open. The glare of her wasting gas smote the huge landlady full in the face. For a moment she stood speechless and motionless a

the defiance of her authority which this illumination signified. Then she made a motion towards Tom as if to lay violent hands on him.

Fortunately nothing of the kind happened. Help came to Tom from an unexpected source — the chandelier, which he had rescued from darkness and disuse. A sharp, singing note fell suddenly upon the landlady's ear. From a defective burner a hissing stream of flame shot obliquely towards the ceiling. Mrs. Bannan looked. The flame shortened itself, strove to resume the normal square-cut proportions of a well regulated gas jet, struggled ineffectually for several burning seconds, and then flashed out again, sharper and more sibilant than before.

Mrs. Bannan forgot all about Tom's case for the moment. All her horror of gas men and gas bills rose to the surface of her emotional sea at the sight, and the billows of her wrath smoothed themselves out under the oleaginous film of cupidity. With three great strides she was beneath the chandelier and clutching at the offending jet. She abolished it, then turned to the others. When she had finished, the room was in darkness, save for the radiance which streamed down upon the floor from the green shaded reading lamp.

Perhaps even this would not have escaped, save for the fact that Mrs. Bannan was not garbed in a manner which she would have considered proper for

a dark room containing a handsome young single gentleman. She had divested herself of the gay habiliments to which Merkle had referred as her "theater rags" and now stood forth in a single garment, which brought to her, in comfort, more than it robbed her of, in elegance. A cotton bathrobe, of faded blue, enveloped her. It was secured with a string about her massy neck and fell tarpaulin-like till it swept the floor. It was one of those robes that, in their original form are further secured by a tasselled rope around the waist, but Mrs. Bannan had lost or discarded this useful cincture, and made shift to preserve the unities by putting a hand in either pocket and drawing the edges of the garment together with the leverage which these fulcrum points provided.

As she turned to vent her delayed wrath on Tom, the landlady's hands suddenly recollected their duty to their mistress and slid into place, leaving her tongue to do battle alone. But Mrs. Bannan's wrath ever fell suddenly as it rose. Then too, she rather pitied Tom, who had always treated her with friendly deference, even in his flush days, and she thought that she was now obliged, purely for business reasons to throw him out into the street, softened her heart. When she spoke, therefore, it was more in sorrow than in anger.

"It's a good thing I was out to-night myself,"

she began. "A nice time I'd have had waiting up for you."

"I'm sorry," said Tom. The landlady eyed him speculatively.

"I'm sorry," he said again, "but I haven't got anything for you, Mrs. Bannan."

The landlady drew one hand from her pocket with modest caution and held something out to Tom.

"Here's a letter," she said. "It came after you left. Perhaps it's what you've been waiting for."

"Thank you," said Tom. He took the letter over to the reading lamp and bent down to examine the handwriting. He stood so a few moments, while the landlady waited. He straightened up at last, and faced her with the unopened letter in his hand.

"I don't think it's going to help me," he said.

"From home, isn't it?" asked Mrs. Bannan.

"Yes. From my mother."

"Better open it," she suggested.

"I will, if you'll excuse me," he said, and bent over the lamp again. She eyed him intently as he tore open the flap and began to read. She saw him start violently, almost at the first line, then a bitter expression twisted his features and the letter slipped from his hand and fluttered to the floor. His jaw fell and he gaped stupidly ahead of him as though he had forgotten her presence.

"Well?" she said sharply.

He recovered himself with a shivering intake of the breath.

"It's — it's not what I had expected," he stammered.

"Didn't she send you anything?" demanded the landlady.

"I hadn't asked her to send me anything," replied Tom huskily. "She doesn't know anything about it." He clutched at his throat. "It's about — about a friend of mine who is going to be married."

At Tom's first words the landlady had moved forward with fresh fires kindling in her eyes. At the evidences of his distress, she relented.

"Then, I'm very sorry, Mr. Wilson —"

"You needn't explain, Mrs. Bannan," Tom interrupted quickly. "I understand perfectly. You can't afford to keep me here, of course. You've been very good to keep me here so long. I'll be gone in the morning."

"That's all very well," retorted Mrs. Bannan, back again in her proper rôle of landlady. "Very well," she repeated. "But where do I get off?"

"I'll send you what I owe you some day," said Tom. The landlady gave vent to a scornful "Ha! Ha!" at this indefinite assurance. "Meanwhile, I'll leave you what I have. This watch is worth something —"

He drew from his pocket an old-fashioned silver timepiece. It had been his father's watch, and Tom stood for a moment fumbling it before he handed it over to Mrs. Bannan. She started to slip it into her pocket, then slowly withdrew her hand and looked from Tom to the watch and back again.

"I hope you understand my position, Mr. Wilson," said the landlady in a tone that was more nearly apologetic than delinquent boarder had ever heard from her lips before. "I have my own living to make," she went on, "and I've been stung before."

"I have no one but myself to blame, Mrs. Bannan," said Tom. "Thank you for your trouble."

Still hesitating, the landlady turned the watch over in her hand. Tom dully wished she'd make an end of it and leave him alone.

"Good night," he said, curtly.

The landlady's head came up with a stiff jerk. She dropped the watch into her pocket. Then her eye sought the dark corner of the room where Tom's trunk stood.

"I suppose you'll leave your things for security," she said.

"Of course," he replied, moving towards the door.

"Good night," said the landlady, and stalked out.

Tom closed the door carefully behind her. He

stood leaning there for a while, his hand still on the knob and a dazed look in his eyes as if he did not know which way to turn. The noise of a wagon clattering along the stony street roused him from his reflections, and he walked slowly into the room, rubbing his head between his hands as if to dispel by friction the strange mental dizziness that possessed him. His eye fell on the letter, where it lay just on the edge of the sharp circle of light cast by the reading lamp upon the floor.

He seized it convulsively, spread it out on the table and began to read, mumbling the sentences aloud and listening to his own voice as though the assurance of the written characters alone were not sufficiently convincing. Suddenly he broke off, flung himself into a chair, dropped his head on his hands, and gazed dully at the carpet.

For a long time he did not stir. Finally he took up the letter, read it through, put it back on the table, and rose wearily to his feet. Then, with an automatic gesture, he felt for his watch.

The mild shock of finding his pocket empty was enough to bring Tom back to a sense of his surroundings, and he began to make preparations for what must be his last night in the Bannan boarding house. He walked over to the folding bed, pulled it down and began, in orthodox house wife fashion, to pat the flattened pillows into a semblance of downy fullness. Before he had completed his task

he fell into another abstracted fit, and, holding a pillow in his hands, sank into a sitting posture upon the edge of the bed.

A sudden rattling of the doorknob brought him to his feet. Then the door was opened cautiously and Amy LeRoy peered into the room.

CHAPTER XIX

TOM ASKS QUESTIONS

"O H," said Amy, "I didn't know that you were in here," and she made a motion to withdraw. Tom stopped her.

"I've been hoping you'd come," he said. "Come in. I want to speak to you."

Amy entered and pushed the door shut behind her, but kept her hand on the knob.

"I can't come in now." She leaned forward and her voice dropped to a loud whisper. "Mr. Michaelson is with me," she explained.

"Who?" asked Tom.

"Jimmy Michaelson," lisped the girl. "I didn't know the parlor was occupied. I was going to bring him in."

"What for?" demanded Tom.

"He wants to say good night to me," replied Amy.

"I see," said Tom, after a slight pause. He eyed her curiously.

"I can't keep him in the hall," said the girl petulantly. "It's so public."

Tom transferred his gaze to the pillow, which, he

suddenly noticed, he was still holding in his hand. He flung it down impatiently on the bed.

"I'm sorry to inconvenience Mr. Michaels," he said at last, "but I can't go out into the street in this dress. Better say good night to him, then come back."

"Oh, I can't come back," exclaimed the girl, in tones of horrified protest. "Do you know what time it is? I'll see you in the morning."

"Better make it to-night, Amy," said Tom. "I may not be here in the morning."

She looked around the room. Her glance took in the open bed, the trunk in the window corner.

"Are you going away?" she asked.

"Mrs. Bannan thinks I ought to," replied Tom, with a wry smile. "Tell Michaelson good night and come back," he repeated.

Amy considered. "I know perfectly well I ought not to be in a gentleman's room at this time of night," she said, with an affectation of girlish sapience. "But—" she sighed profoundly—"you have such an influence over me."

She went out and Tom turned to pick up his letter and photographs. Something he heard in the hall caused him to stop suddenly and shoot a glance of savage inquiry towards the closed door. There was a rustling of silk, a slight scraping of feet, then a smothered "Oh, you mustn't," repeated after an instant, more feebly. A short silence and then the

street door slammed and someone passed under the windows whistling a light air.

After a moment, Amy appeared. She looked rather anxiously at Tom, who was facing the door with a look of fierce intentness on his face, then, throwing the door wide open, she sidled past him into the room.

"Poor fellow," she gurgled, nervously. "He's got to go away up town all alone." Contemplation of Jimmy's enforced loneliness seemed to affect her singularly. "Ain't it too bad?" she sighed.

Tom's reply was to walk to the door and close it swiftly, as though by so doing he were shutting Jimmy out of the conversation. The girl sprang towards him.

"Don't close the door," she pleaded. "I left it open on purpose. Haven't you any regard for my reputation?"

Her voice rose at the last in indignant appeal. Tom regarded her coldly.

"I don't think your reputation is in any danger," he said. "Sit down."

Amy's fears for her reputation were easily dispelled it seemed. "My, but you're getting awfully bossy," she pouted. She sauntered over towards the curtained door and pointed.

"Who's in there?" she asked, lowering her voice to a confidential whisper.

"Mr. Merkle has that room," he told her.

Amy drew her pretty features into the daintiest of grimaces.

"Nasty thing," she said. "He's so sore on himself you can hear him crack every time he smiles."

"Sit down, Amy," said Tom, peremptorily. "I have something serious to say to you."

Amy seated herself on the edge of a big chair, hitched it forward to the edge of the illuminated circle on the floor, crossed her silken ankles at an attractive angle, and admired the tips of her smart pumps while she waited for Tom to speak. He hesitated, not knowing just how to begin.

"I suppose you're going to scold me again," she whimpered, after the fashion of a well rehearsed child actress about to undergo the rebuke of a beloved elder. "Oh, well," resignedly, "get it over with."

"I'm not going to scold," said Tom. "I only want to ask a question or two."

Amy yawned delicately behind her hand. "Hurry up, then," she said, "'cause I'm tired and sleepy."

"I won't keep you any longer than is necessary," said Tom. "This is probably the last chance I'll have for a while," he explained, "and I want to get some things straight."

"Needn't look at me as if I'd done something," protested the girl, disquieted by the earnestness

with which he spoke. "What is it?" she asked abruptly.

Tom came closer and looked down into her face. "Amy," he said, "why did you lead me to think you cared for me?"

She turned her baby blue eyes up to meet his. "I do care for you," she said rather uneasily.

"No, no. Seriously," he insisted.

"Honest I do," she protested. Her eyes caressed him with shy intimacy — a discreet display which she had always found effective. She grasped his hand and tried to bring his face down to a level with her own. "I think an awful lot of you," she murmured.

Tom was unmoved by her little coqueties. He stood stubbornly erect. "How about Michaelson?" he demanded.

"O-ho!" said the girl to herself. "Jealous!" She felt vastly relieved. This was too easy. She could proceed now with all the certainty of experience.

"I care for him, too," she said, "but not in the same way."

"A woman can't care for two men at the same time."

The blue eyes filled with wonder at this masculine unreasonableness. "Why can't she?" demanded the girl. "I know lots of men that love more than one woman."

Tom gazed at her with astonishment. It was something of a shock to hear such sentiments from lips so girlish. He wondered if she realized all that her words might suggest. She sat looking at him as if she had advanced an unanswerable argument.

"That's different," he said at last. "Some men are — animals."

Amy's hands fell together in her lap with limp and patient resignation.

"My," she sighed, "you were such a sweet boy when you first came from the country. Now, you're just like the others."

Tom returned to the question. "You haven't answered me," he reminded her. "Why did you let me think you loved me?" She tried to rise from her chair, with some notion of escaping to her room and leaving him to answer the question for himself, but his hand, lightly laid on her shoulder, restrained her.

"Mind you," he said, "I'm not squealing. It's only that I don't understand and want to be put straight. Why did you let me think so?"

The girl was silent. It wasn't so easy as she had thought.

"Why?" he repeated, peremptorily. "I hadn't any money, any position, anything that appeals to a mercenary nature. I was absolutely frank with you and I thought you were with me."

He stepped back. Amy had produced a handkerchief and was making rapid little dabs at her eyes.

"I knew you were going to say something like that," she said, chokingly. "I'm always being misunderstood."

"I'm not reproaching you, Amy," said Tom soothingly.

"You said I was mercenary," wept the girl. "That I wasn't frank with you."

"I've said nothing of the kind," replied Tom, his voice hardening a trifle. "You wilfully misunderstand me."

"I've told you everything there was to know," she sobbed, "and that is what very few girls would have done. I never kept anything back. I even let myself get talked about on your account, and this is all I get for it."

And, affected to genuine tears by her own recital of her grievances, she flung herself around in the big chair and wept into its upholstered back. Tom stood for a while uncomfortably watching her heaving shoulders. Then he sank into another chair and waited.

"I think I've shown my appreciation," he said, when her agitation seemed to have subsided. "I did all that I could. I thought you were satisfied."

Amy wheeled around. "Well," she retorted, "you haven't heard me kick."

"Actions speak louder than words," said Tom. He thought of the smothered noises out in the hall. "There is Mr. Michaelson," he reminded her.

Amy bounced to her feet.

"Oh," she exclaimed angrily, "I suppose you think —"

"I don't want to think," interrupted Tom, who had quickly risen to face her. "I don't want to believe anything of you that isn't right. That's why I'm asking these questions."

She looked at him imploringly, but her eyes seemed to have lost their power to charm. His countenance was set and stern. Her own face grew hard, as if some spiteful decision had suddenly been recorded there. If Tom insisted on asking questions, well — he stood in a fair way of being enlightened.

"What do you want me to say?" she asked sharply.

"If you don't know" — he hesitated, seeking terms which would not seem too harsh — "If you don't know, I can't prompt you. But I want you to recall our agreement. You said people were talking about you because we were going so much together, and — I asked you to marry me. I didn't pretend to love you. I told you all about myself and the" — he faltered again — "about the girl who didn't believe in me. And you said you'd stick to me and be a pal, and together we'd try to

succeed. Well, I have tried, tried awfully hard, but I can't succeed without sympathy and encouragement."

He came to full stop. The girl was following him intently, but he could read little of either sympathy or encouragement in her eyes. She was simply waiting.

"You've made me feel that I need you. That's all," he concluded.

"I meant what I said, Tom," she replied steadily. "But a girl needs lots of things that you don't understand. So I just had to make other arrangements."

"Other arrangements?" he echoed.

"Yes," she replied, and she allowed a childish note of delighted anticipation to creep into her voice. "I'm going to move into a beau-u-tiful apartment on Central Park West."

Then she folded her arms and waited for the explosion. To her amazement, her announcement fell flat.

"It doesn't matter where you move," said Tom quietly, "so long as I can see you."

The girl shrugged her shoulders resentfully. She might have been spared the unpleasant necessity of going into bald particulars.

"That's just it," she said, tentatively. "You can't see me."

"Why not?"

"Because"—she spoke each word with the cold incisiveness which such stupidity merited—"Because Jimmy won't allow me to have any gentlemen visitors."

"Jimmy!" cried Tom. He stared at her for a moment as if he sought to catch her meaning and it were just eluding his grasp. Then, as the full import of her words bit into his brain, a look of disgust and horror stole into his eyes and he staggered back, catching at the air like a man struck in the face and stunned. He dropped heavily into his chair and covered his face with his hands.

"God!" he said.

A vague expression, this last—a term with as many possibilities of interpretation as there are wise men to talk and fools to listen. The girl did not understand. "Jimmy"—she knew him. She smiled slightly.

CHAPTER XX

THE GAS ROUTE

TAKING the "Jimmy" end of it alone into account, Tom's behavior was indeed admirable. Certainly it was tremendously flattering to the "broiler's" vanity. Her charms had never stirred such a passion before and she was willing, nay eager, to confirm this pleasingly jealous lover in the undisturbed possession of the limited share of her affections that she reserved for sentimental traffic. And yet — there had been something in his face, which had not entirely escaped her, that had puzzled her not a little; something she didn't exactly like, that made her smile thin and wary and kept it so. Besides Tom wasn't keeping up to the mark. After the single, shuddering outcry that had voiced the climax of his despair, he had remained silent and motionless, his face hidden in his hands. He might almost be thought to have forgotten her presence.

The girl stood watching him intently. It was really very puzzling, the way he was acting. She had expected a secondary outburst — a storm of angry words, which she was prepared to endure graciously, considering the provocation — a blow per-

haps. Even that token of overwrought affection might be put up with, if not dodged.

But this strange silence perplexed her, was getting on her nerves. She took two hesitating steps towards him. He seemed to stir slightly at her approach as if he were about to look up, and she made little, ineffectual movements with her outstretched arms, coaxing him out of his sullenness. He did not see. He was trembling slightly, and his face, what she could see of it, was very white.

She began to be alarmed. A girl she knew, a Broadway "broiler" like herself, had been shot at a few days before by a desperate, discarded lover. Perhaps it would be just as well to get out of this while she had a chance.

She threw a covert glance at the door and would have made a rush for it had it not been for a sudden panic fright that left her legs weak and trembling. She began to sidle towards it, on tiptoe. She had gained more than half the distance when Tom, lifting his head and instantly divining her purpose, sprang to his feet and barred her way.

Tom planted his foot against the door. The girl clung frantically to the knob.

"Now don't be mean," she squealed, her voice thin as a rat's with terror. "You know I oughtn't to be here."

"That doesn't come well from a woman like you," said Tom.

He spoke bitterly, but with a calmness that reassured the terrified girl. As her fears subsided, her temper rose.

"I won't stay and listen to such language," she cried spitefully. "Better let me out or I'll scream."

She was almost screaming as she made her threat, but Tom did not budge. A flush sprang to his white face.

"Go ahead and scream," he challenged her. "Go ahead. Call up everybody in the house, and when they come —"

The girl was shrinking back into the room, fearful lest Tom's voice so near the door should carry through the house. He followed her step by step as he delivered his defiance.

"When they come, tell them the truth. Tell them that you are the sort of woman they thought you. Tell them how you duped a boy from the country who was still fool enough to have illusions about women."

"That isn't so," she flashed back. "I never fooled you about anything. It isn't my fault, if you had crazy ideas about me."

The argument struck Tom. It put the thing to him in a new light. He turned her words over in his mind. She was telling the truth, as she saw it. He wanted to be fair.

"No," he said at last. "It wasn't your fault. I

can't blame you if God created the outward features of a good woman and forgot to put in the soul."

His eyes were studying the girl in a detached, impersonal way that ruffled her vanity more than his words.

"You've got an awful nerve to talk to me like that," she burst forth.

"I'm speaking the truth," replied Tom, turning away from her with a weary gesture, "and that, I fear, is more than you can understand."

She followed him. She was in a waspish temper now, eager to sting.

"Is that so?" she snapped. "I understand a good deal more than you do, Mr. Wilson, which isn't so much. If you think I'm going to throw away the first good chance I've had just because it doesn't please you—" she ended with an energetic sniff, which expressed better than words the full measure of her contempt.

Her scorn was wasted upon Tom, it seemed. He heard her through quietly, his eyes fixed in a fascinated stare on the dimple that came and went in her soft cheek with each movement of her lips. Many times before he had watched that dimple, twinkling coquettishly into sight and out again, as though challenging the eye to a frolic at hide-and-seek. But now there was a new and sinister meaning in the game it played. It was a dimple that had gained a market value and lost its soul.

So absorbed was the youth in his bitter reflections, that, of all she had said, one phrase alone arrested his attention. "The first good chance!" He said the words over slowly to himself, analyzing them. Then, to the girl:

"That's all it means to you — a good chance?"

There was a sense of sickened repugnance in his soul that he could not suppress, and his voice rang with bitter disgust. Not for the girl — he only wished she'd go away now and leave him alone — but for the poor, vain, self-sufficient fool that had been Tom Wilson. The girl did not understand that. She took the taunt to herself, naturally enough, and she answered him in kind.

"It's more than anything you ever offered me," she jeered. "You never gave me anything. You" — the contempt in her tones reached the saturation point — "you hadn't anything to give. At least you'll do me that credit. I never took anything from you."

"You took nothing from me?" cried Tom, stung to futile resentment by her stubborn iteration. "My faith, my hope, my self-respect — is all that nothing?"

"Doesn't cost anything," retorted the girl.

"I've paid the biggest possible price for them," he said.

Amy shrugged her pretty shoulders. "Oh, well," she said, "if you're going to talk like that —"

Tom realized that his words were wasted. "What's the use?" he said. "You don't understand. You never will. You'll go on to the end, looking for a good chance." He turned and walked over to his trunk. "There's nothing keeping you now," he said over his shoulder. "Run along."

She hesitated for a moment, biting her lips, then stole over him across the room.

"Listen, Tom," she said, in wheedling tones. "It's not half so bad as you try to make it. Perhaps we can manage to see each other without Jimmy's knowing anything about it. I do care an awful lot for you in spite of what you've said."

He would not even turn around to listen. She laid her hand caressingly on his shoulder. "If you'll just be reasonable," she coaxed.

Tom shrank aside and her hand, shaken from its resting place, fell to her side.

"What's the matter now?" cried the girl, surprised.

"You said you wanted to go to your room," he said. "Why don't you go?"

She flushed angrily at this ungracious speech. She had put herself in the wrong to save his vanity, and this was her reward.

"I'm going," she snapped, "only now that we've said so much, we may as well finish up." She paused for a moment to gather emphasis. "I'm glad we've had this talk," she went on, more deliberately.

"It's been a good thing for both of us. I'll get what I want, and you can go back to the country and marry that little jay you're always talking about. She's got all that soul stuff that you seem to want so badly."

He turned upon her so fiercely that she shrank back out of reach.

"Please leave Miss Belknap out of it," he said. "I'm no longer concerned in her affairs. She's to be married."

"O-oh!" exclaimed the girl, her face illuminated with sudden understanding, "so that's what's the matter with you. You've been thinking of her and taking it out on me." She regarded him with rising wrath. "Well, you certainly have your nerve with you. And me wasting all this sympathy on you. Good night, Mr. Wilson."

She flounced to the door and flung herself into the hall, then turned and leaned forward to look into the room. Tom was standing with averted face, just as she had left him. His wooden indifference enraged her.

"For all I care," she cried shrilly, "you can go straight — to — the — devil!"

Tom heard the door close, heard her steps on the stairs, and then silence settled down upon the house. For a long while he did not stir. He seemed hardly to breathe. His eyes were fixed in a dull, unseeing stare, and he stood like an automa-

ton waiting for some external impulse to actuate its mechanism. After a time, stimulated to a sort of reflex activity by the heat and closeness of the room, he moved towards the window, walking like a man in his sleep. He drew up the sash, and, as the outside air struck his face, inhaled deeply.

His eye was caught and held by a string of colored lanterns that swung gently in the breeze in the beer garden across the street. He became vaguely aware that the orchestra was in action and that a waiter, in a dinner jacket, was singing in a mellow baritone voice to its accompaniment. The scene swam before his eyes in a hazy, far away fashion till the singer, moving about on the little platform, turned on his heels and faced him. Perhaps the man saw the listless figure silhouetted in the frame of the window, for he stretched forth his hands as though addressing it, and the refrain he was singing came to Tom's ears with sudden, jarring distinctness:

"Gee, I wish that I had a girl."

Tom softly closed the window and turned away. The words had set his numb brain going again. His sense of reality became instantly acute, and he groaned. It was precisely what, by some sub-conscious effort, he had been struggling to avoid. He did not want to think — least of all of Jane, of Fairview, the world from which he had irretrievably cut himself off. And for what? All that he had

dreamed of and hoped and fought for had come down to this.

He looked about him. The room had suddenly become a hateful prison to him, the city beyond a vast, hostile camp, whose millions hemmed him in from the open country. There was no avenue of escape. He was every way entangled. A sense of hopeless exhaustion, physical and moral, weighed him down. He had used the last ounce of his strength and had failed. His dreaming had come to an end.

He roused himself at last, or rather the force of habit asserted itself, when his eye, idling over the floor, lighted upon his alarm clock, the relentless monitor of his mornings. He took it up and, walking slowly up and down, began to wind. He worked mechanically, making long pauses, in each of which he fell into a listening attitude, as though he heard the calling of distant voices. He finished at last, adjusted the alarm, and went forward to set the clock down upon the little table.

Of a sudden he started violently, and his limbs became bent and rigid as if he had stumbled upon a snake. His mouth opened and shut spasmodically and his eyes stared, fascinated, at a slender, green thing that hung from the chandelier, the flexible gas tube that fed the reading lamp on the table. His muscles twitched convulsively, and he clutched the clock to his breast, muffling it in his dressing

gown, as if it might escape his grasp and ring out an inopportune alarm.

With a supreme effort he controlled his trembling limbs. He put the clock down softly on the table and then his hand stole out cautiously toward the slightly swaying green thing, as if it were something alive. He seized it swiftly and firmly, and as he felt it safe in his grasp, his face hardened into an expression of resolute decision. With rapid accurate movements he turned out the lamp, reached up and detached the tube from the chandelier, and pulled its lower end loose from the lamp. He carried it across the room, fastened it to the burner that jutted from the wall beside his bed, buried the other end in the bed clothes and stepped back.

It was a new tube, still stiff in its original windings, and when he released it, it coiled suddenly back and struck at him like a serpent. He caught the loose, wriggling end, put it back in the bed, and weighted it down with his pillow.

A creaking noise, from somewhere that sounded near, startled him into an attitude of strained attention. He glanced towards the hall, then at the green curtains that screened Merkle's door, jerking his head from side to side. He could not locate the source of the sound, and it was not repeated. Re-assured after a moment, he walked back into the room, sought out pen, ink and paper, seated himself at the reading table, and prepared to write.

"Dearest mother," he began. His hand commenced to shake again, so violently that he could go no further. The pen slipped from his fingers and rolled off the table to the floor. He let it lie, and sat crouched above the table trying to think.

There was a slight, rustling sound behind him, but Tom, his mind far away, did not hear. A hand had moved Merkle's curtains apart and, after an instant, let them fall together again. Soon, the hand reappeared through the curtains, and Merkle's head and body followed it. He took a noiseless step into the room, and the curtains closed softly behind him. Tom was oblivious.

Merkle stood for a moment, hesitating to disturb the crouched figure before him. He saw the darkened reading lamp without its tube, and swept the room with a keen glance. The missing tube hung from the wall in plain view, and, as Merkle noted the dispositions Tom had made and the meaning of it all came home to him, his eyes traveled back to Tom, and he fell to rubbing his rough chin reflectively. It did not take him long apparently to decide upon his course of action, for presently he straightened up and was about to speak.

He checked the words at his lips, for Tom had raised his head and was looking for his pen. He picked it up, dipped it carefully in the ink, straightened his paper before him, and read aloud what he had written.

"Dearest mother."

The words glided into a groan. He grasped the pen with desperate resolution and, mumbling the words he wished it to trace, made shift in that fashion to proceed:

"At last I have found something big —"

CHAPTER XXI

THE ARGUMENTUM AD HOMINEM

MERKLE delayed no longer. Even before Tom spoke, he had heard and seen enough to know what must be done and he fancied he knew the particular way to do it. He had waited only to seize the diplomatic moment for setting about what he realized must be a gravely delicate undertaking. He felt strongly the need of proceeding with the utmost circumspection. Tom, always a sensitive youth, was now in a state of mind to resent and repel any but the most tactful interference. It is doing Merkle's modesty no injustice to say that he felt fully equal to the immediate needs of the situation.

But it wasn't only this affair of the gas tube. Of course Tom wasn't to be allowed to make away with himself in that impulsive fashion. The boy would continue to exist for some time, in some fashion or other. The question was: How? That was up to Merkle. Somewhere in the next five or ten minutes must be the turning point of Tom's life, be it long or short. It lay in Merkle's hands to determine whether the critical impulse should be to good or evil.

This, or something like this, had flashed through the alert brain of the newspaper man before Tom, in a manner that seemed half delirious, began to mutter the message he was trying to put on paper. Then, with quick regard for the boy's rights of mental privacy, Merkle made haste to announce his presence.

"Excuse me for coming in again to-night," he said.

His tones were easy and natural, as befitted a speech so simple, but their effect on Tom shocked him. The boy went suddenly limp and pale, as if from excess of terror, and he stared at Merkle as if the robust newspaper man had been a visitor from the land of shadows. He swayed in his chair and, for an instant seemed about to fall, but recovered before Merkle could make a move to go to his assistance.

Merkle behaved as if he had noticed nothing out of the ordinary, and everything had passed off so quickly that the pretense was an easy one to maintain. After a moment Tom turned to his letter and hastily covered it with a piece of blotting paper. Then he rose to his feet.

"I thought you had gone to bed," he said harshly.

"This damn shoulder," apologized Merkle, laying his hand tenderly on the maligned joint and wincing realistically. "It won't let me sleep. I

knew you were still up because your light comes through my doors."

The youth's ill-humor was softened at the sight of the other's suffering.

"Sorry the light bothers you," he said. He went over to the door and began to fumble at the curtains. "Perhaps I can fix it."

"I don't mind the light," said Merkle, advancing quickly. "It's this confounded pain." He fondled his shoulder once more and groaned distressfully, while he looked appealingly at Tom. "I thought you might loan me that miraculous liniment again," he said.

"Sure," replied Tom. But he hesitated for a moment, considering how he might best get rid of Merkle before the newspaper man's suspicions were aroused.

"Sure," he repeated mechanically. He gazed across the room at his scattered belongings. "If I can find it," he supplemented.

He started towards his trunk to search for it. Merkle walked over to the little table and let his eyes fall upon the letter.

"Writing?" he inquired, in a casual tone.

Tom turned hastily, alarmed lest Merkle, who had more than once urged him to try his hand at literary work in his leisure moments, might mistake the nature of his composition and seek to read and criticize it.

"Nothing important," he said. "Just some letters."

"Oh," said Merkle. He turned away as if his interest in the matter had departed, and Tom threw open his trunk and delved in. The liniment was not where he had thought he had left it. He got down on his knees and rummaged diligently. "Wonder where that bottle can have got to?" he grumbled. "They've changed me so often that I can't keep track of anything."

Merkle, ostentatiously busy filling up his pipe, was all the while watching Tom out of the corner of his eye.

"Don't go to any trouble," he said at last. He scratched a match and puffed noisily at the choked briar. "Perhaps a smoke will brace me up, if only I can get this confounded thing to burn."

Tom rose, the bottle in his hand.

"Here it is," he said, and held it out for Merkle to see.

"Find it?" asked Merkle, who had begun to hope that he wouldn't. "Good."

Tom shook the bottle and held it up to the light. "Enough for one rub, I guess," he said, estimating its contents. "Want me to help you?"

"No, thanks," replied Merkle. "I can manage all right."

He took the precious bottle and started for his room. As he turned, he let his eyes rest on the gas

tube hanging from the wall, as if he had just seen it for the first time. He gazed at it for a moment, not too curiously, then turning again to Tom, who was watching him in an agony of apprehension, he jerked his head questioningly toward the tube.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

"Why — I," stammered Tom, "you see — I was going to connect it with the lamp, so that I could read in bed."

Merkle looked dubiously from Tom to the tube and back again.

"I see," he said at last, satisfied apparently with Tom's explanation, but reluctant to give up some different notion which had found lodgment in his head. "I see. For a moment I thought it meant something else." He turned to the tube again as though it held some strange attraction for him. "I suppose," he went on slowly, "it was because I was thinking of that same thing myself."

Tom's nerves gave a quick jump. "What thing?" he asked.

"You know," replied Merkle gloomily. Tom seemingly didn't know, and Merkle elucidated. "Taking a trip over the gas route," he put it.

Tom gave a little shuddering laugh. This vulgar characterization of the mysterious journey he had been facing, affected him unpleasantly. It seemed incredible that a man who was really con-

templating self-destruction, could speak of it in that mocking way.

"Stop your kidding," was all he could say.

But the newspaper man seemed in deadly earnest. "On the level," he said. "There isn't much fun going through this agony, day in and day out."

There was a note of hopeless misery in his voice that stirred Tom to sympathy. And with his sympathy was mingled not a little of curious interest. He was having another unexpected glimpse of the newspaper man's strange character. Merkle had always seemed to him a sort of human porcupine, armed against the world at large. If a real porcupine had walked into his room and laid aside its quills and poured out the secret of its fretfulness, he could hardly have been more surprised.

But Tom felt instinctively that it would not do to let Merkle know how this revelation of weakness had impressed him. It was necessary to dissemble, and he affected to speak lightly. He laughed again, more naturally this time.

"You feel that way now because you're in pain," he said. "Things will look different to you in the morning."

"Think so, do you?" growled Merkle, who seemed to resent this belittling of his woes.

"Sure," said Tom heartily. "All you need is a good night's sleep, and you'll wake up feeling fine."

"Thanks," said Merkle, with sarcastic emphasis. He stood for a moment, with a thoughtful look on his face, then abruptly extended his hand. Tom grasped it and attempted a cheerful good-night shake. But Merkle's clasp was as rigid as a vise. He looked Tom straight in the face and his eyes were burning with sombre resolve.

"If you don't see me again — good luck," he said.

His deep, vibrant tones rang in Tom's ears like the reverberations of tolling bells, and his eyes seemed to be adding some unutterable thing to the words he spoke. After a moment, he slowly released Tom's hand and turned away. He had almost reached his door before Tom came out of his entrancement and called sharply.

"Say, Merkle." The newspaper man stopped and turned to Tom inquiringly.

"You didn't really mean what you said just now, did you?" asked Tom.

"What's that?" inquired Merkle. He seemed to be making a sluggish effort to remember. "Oh, yes, about the —" he nodded to indicate the gas tube.

"Yes," said Tom.

Merkle sucked reflectively at his dead pipe. "Well," he drawled, "I'm not sure that I'd use gas, but —"

"You wouldn't be such a fool," exploded Tom,

too impatient to hear him out. "Just because you happen to be in a little pain."

"It isn't the physical pain that counts, son," replied Merkle. He tapped his forehead despondently. He seemed about to speak further, but Tom again cut him short.

"Suppose you are sore on yourself," he exclaimed. "What does that amount to?" He looked at Merkle pityingly, almost contemptuously. "Where's your nerve?" he demanded.

The question seemed to sting, for Merkle shook off his apathy and replied with some show of feeling.

"Perhaps it is a bit cowardly," he said. "But I don't know that it's anybody's business what I do."

He turned abruptly away and his hand was on the curtain of his door, before Tom's anxious cry halted him once more.

"Wait a minute," entreated the youth. "Don't go yet."

"You want to get back to your letters," Merkle reminded him.

"Bother the letters," said Tom. "I've got lots of time. Let's talk this thing over."

With a show of reluctance, Merkle yielded. He walked slowly back to the little table, seated himself, and waited for Tom to begin.

"What happened to you to-day?" was the first question.

"Nothing," replied Merkle. "In fact, I'm tired of waiting for something to happen."

"I see," said Tom, willing to humor his man a little to gain his confidence. "Just a case of down on your luck and feel blue."

Merkle shook his head with a superior sort of a smile, a smile that was full of pity for the inexperienced youth before him.

"You don't understand, son," he said.

"Why don't I?" demanded the nettled youth.

"Well," explained Merkle, "it's different with you. You're young, with a whole lifetime of chances ahead. A beautiful home, a loving mother waiting for you." He let his eyes wander over the table till they lighted upon the photograph of the Fairview home, lying where Tom had tossed it down. "What have I got?" he asked.

"Friends," said Tom.

"Not one," replied Merkle promptly. "Not a soul in the world that really cares."

He sank forward in his chair and gazed sadly at the floor. His words had the ring of truth. Perhaps he had never fully realized his loneliness till now, when, for another's benefit, he had summed up his existence in a phrase. As Tom looked at the bent figure, his heart was touched.

"I care," he said, with sudden diffidence.

"Not enough to count," replied Merkle, with a bitter smile. He had forgotten for the moment

that he had set out to play a part. "I'm on the wrong side of forty," he went on, jerking out his words as if each mouthful were distasteful to him. "Loaded down with bitterness and disappointment. Nothing to look forward to. A nuisance to everybody including myself." He recollected himself suddenly, and with a return to his usual deliberate manner of speaking, invited Tom to consider the items he had presented.

"Those are my assets," he said.

"You never can tell when luck will change," replied Tom, rather feebly.

"I've been telling myself that for a good many years," retorted Merkle. "But it hasn't."

"Because you haven't met it half way," persisted Tom, more combatively, for he felt that his argument was making small progress. "You haven't hustled."

"That's true," Merkle conceded. "I've always let the other fellow get his first."

Tom tried a new line.

"You're in a rut," he said, "and you've got to get out of it. Why, if I had half your talent, I'd be at the top of the profession. There isn't any position I couldn't attain. I've read your stuff," he went on earnestly, "and you're too clever a man not to succeed. All you've got to do is to throw out your chest, go to it with an 'I am it' expression on your face, and get anything you want."

Tom had risen to his feet as he spoke and he ended with fine oratorical effect. But he left Merkle unmoved.

"When I was your age, I talked in exactly the same way," was the cold response.

"But I mean it, old man," said Tom, urgently. "There are thousands of opportunities all over the country just waiting for a man like you."

"Where?" growled Merkle.

"Everywhere," replied Tom, with a gesture that took in the horizon.

"That's too indefinite," was the grating reply.

"But,"—Tom suddenly bethought himself—"I know one town that's a cinch. They're dying for a newspaper, and a man like you could make a fortune at it."

"Let's pretend," rejoined Merkle, "that I'm from the grand old state of Missouri."

"I can show you all right," said Tom. "It's the town I came from. Fairview, New York."

"How big is it?" asked Merkle.

"Over five thousand."

Merkle, for the first time, betrayed symptoms of interest in what Tom was trying to tell him.

"Five thousand?" he repeated. "And they haven't any local sheet?"

"Not when I left," said Tom.

"That sounds pretty good," Merkle conceded.

"I know what I'm talking about," Tom assured.

him. "I used to dream of trying it myself, but nobody had any confidence in me. You could go up there, live in our cottage, and be a successful newspaper proprietor in no time. No telling how much you'd clean up."

"You seem pretty sure," said Merkle. His eyes were following Tom as the youth walked up and down in front of him. He seemed impressed, in spite of himself, by Tom's earnestness.

"Because I've lived there," said Tom. "I know the people and what they want. You take my advice and go."

Merkle seemed to consider deeply, scratching his chin after the manner he had when anything perplexed him. Tom had stopped in his walk to watch him. After a moment or two the newspaper man raised his head and looked Tom straight in the eye.

"All right," he said. "I'll go — if you will come with me."

"Me?" cried Tom, taken off his feet at this unexpected offer.

"Sure," said Merkle confidently. "If it's half as good as you seem to think it is, there's enough for two."

Tom hesitated painfully. Fairview was the last place on earth he wanted to show his face. He had never forgotten his parting boast to Judge Belknap: "I'll never show up here a failure." And Jane! No, he couldn't face it. If only Merkle had pro-

posed a jaunt to the South Pole, or any other impossible place, he would have fallen in with the venture cheerfully enough. And yet—how could he refuse to enter upon a plan that promised salvation for the man he had set out to save from himself? His embarrassment grew when he noticed that Merkle was watching him keenly.

"I'd rather not, old man," he stammered, when he could delay his reply no longer.

"Oh, I see," said Merkle, with cutting emphasis. "It's good enough for me, but not for you."

"No, no," said Tom hastily, distressed at Merkle's attitude. "It isn't that. There are reasons why I can't go back to Fairview."

"Something keeping you here?" demanded Merkle.

"Yes, something I can't explain."

"Nothing at home you can't face?"

Tom flushed under the question and the grave look that accompanied it.

"Nothing criminal, if that's what you mean," he replied.

"Then what is it?"

"I can't tell you," replied Tom, with dogged persistence.

Merkle eyed the youth curiously. He seemed perplexed at his attitude.

"You've got a home—a mother," he said, after a short pause.

"Yes," said Tom.

"And you can't go back?"

"Not as a failure," replied Tom, in a voice of decision. He sank into his chair and slumped back into a posture of listless dejection.

There was a period of silence. Tom could feel Merkle's searching glance upon him, and he labored to hide his thoughts under a mask of impenetrability.

"That's it, is it?" said Merkle at last. "Your vanity?"

"Vanity!" exclaimed the youth, coming angrily to his feet at this disparaging diagnosis. His irritation was all the greater because he could not help acknowledging to himself that Merkle was nearly half right.

"Yes, your vanity," repeated Merkle, with quiet insistence. "Your vanity is hurt because you haven't succeeded in what you set out to accomplish. And you haven't the moral courage to go back now and face the jeers of the other fellows." He paused for a moment and surveyed the frowning face of the youth before him. His words had cut deep, but not deep enough he believed, to serve his purpose, and an accent of quiet scorn crept into his even tones as he continued.

"Are you going to let it get the best of you?" he asked. "I thought you had better stuff in you."

Tom was standing before him with a tense scowl on his face. For a moment Merkle feared that he

had overplayed his cards and that Tom's next move would be a more or less polite request to quit the room and leave him alone with his injured vanity. He was surprised therefore, and disappointed too, when Tom suddenly relaxed, turned away with a weary droop of the body, and walked back to his chair.

"You can't get around the fact that I'm a failure," he said, with a languid, what-does-it-matter-anyhow sort of air.

"The only discreditable thing about that is that you admit it," retorted Merkle. "Let me tell you something, son."

He rose to his feet and took a turn up and down in front of Tom's chair before he went on. The boy's apathy disconcerted him. It was unnatural. He had seemed interested for a time when Merkle's fortunes were under discussion. His own seemed to have passed out of his concern. Taunts had failed to rouse him. But Merkle refused to be discouraged. He turned to Tom.

"Nine out of every ten men that strike this city," he began, "go up against it in the same way at the start. The tenth may find it easy. Things break right for him at the jump and, before he realizes what it's all about, he finds himself at the top. He doesn't deserve any credit for that. It's been handed to him on a silver platter. But the other nine —"

He swung his fist into his palm with a resounding thwack that made Tom look up. "The other nine have to fight for it. Some of them haven't the staying qualities and 'lay down,' but those who have the right stuff in them refuse to acknowledge that they're licked, so they shut their teeth hard and go at it once more. Perhaps they get another solar plexus, but they're up at the sound of the gong, and they keep coming up in spite of their knockdowns until the world realizes that they can't be kept down, and so is forced to make a place for them."

Carried away by the eloquence of his own imagery, Merkle's voice had risen as he proceeded, and his phrases had been punctuated with prize-ring guards and jabs. Now he came to a sudden halt and extended his hand to Tom with a gesture of confident appeal. "Believe me, son," he said, "a man isn't a failure till he admits it himself."

"That sounds all right," said Tom, moved, but not convinced, "but there's something more to it than worldly success. I've found that out. A man has to have — character." He hesitated at the word as though its enunciation cost him a wrench. "I've shown just how little I have," he added bitterly.

"You've got character, all right," replied Merkle quickly, "or you wouldn't admit that you hadn't. All you have to do now to prove it, is to assume the responsibility that goes with it."

"What responsibility?" asked Tom, taking bait.

"Myself," said Merkle promptly. "I agreed to take a chance at your suggestion. That's your responsibility, and you can't shirk it. Now I propose to do the same for you. Let's be responsible for each other. Let's go into this thing as partners."

"Not at Fairview," replied Tom, setting his jaw stubbornly at Merkle's renewed appeal.

"It's the only way you can make good," urged Merkle.

"You don't understand, Merkle," said Tom. He wanted to stop there, but Merkle's insistent gaze compelled him to proceed.

"There's a girl," he said.

"Ah-h!" said Merkle slowly. "The girl at home?" For a moment he seemed at a loss. "There always is," he went on, a generalization vexing to Tom. "But," with renewed briskness, "that's all the more reason why you shouldn't let her go down."

"I can't face it," said Tom, dropping his head.

"The hell you can't." Merkle's voice rose to an indignant roar. "You're coming home with me."

"I'm not," said Tom, with an obstinacy equal to Merkle's own.

"Think it over," advised Merkle, with irritating pertinacity.

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"IF YOU WANT TO TALK, YOU'LL HAVE TO DO IT IN THE DARK."

"Don't you think I have thought?" exclaimed the youth. "I've thought until my brain reels." He rose to his feet with an impatient fling of the hands. "Don't talk to me any more," he said with gruff decision. "I want to be alone."

He started towards the curtained door, but Merkle stepped in his path, gripped him by the shoulders, and held him fast.

"I've made up my mind to go," he said, "and you're going with me."

Tom, unable to free himself without undue violence, turned his face aside and remained resolutely silent. In a kinder voice Merkle went on.

"Just think how comfy we'll be in the old home," he said, "and how happy the mother will be to see her boy again." He could feel Tom tremble under his hands. "You don't think she'll consider you a failure, do you? Mothers aren't built that way. And the girl — she's probably waiting and hoping that you will come back. What if you have made a fool of yourself? Don't you suppose that she'll understand that you're all the better for the experience? Come home, kid. Come on home with me."

Tom was white and shaking as Merkle released him and stepped back, his hands outstretched in a final appeal.

"Why couldn't you have stayed out of here?" he groaned. "I knew what I wanted to do before

you came in. Why didn't you leave me to myself?"

He gazed at Merkle with dull eyes for a moment longer, then sank into his chair, buried his face in his hands, and went to mumbling stupidly. Merkle determined upon a bold, psychological stroke.

"I came because I wanted to show you the folly of what you had in mind," he said. He spoke very slowly and deliberately, to make sure that no exasperating syllable should be lost.

Tom raised his head and looked at him in bewilderment.

"Then you knew all the time?" he cried.

"I couldn't help overhearing what passed between you and LeRoy," was the reply, "and — I guessed the rest."

Tom sprang to his feet, scarlet with quick resentment. His eyes were flashing now. So then! He had been tricked, trifled with, played for a fool! And with what outrageous ease! All this had been a shallow farce, and he, cheap dolt that he was, had been gossiping of his soul tragedy. He had permitted himself to be brought to the verge of unmanly tears; had listened, almost yielded to a hypocritical appeal.

His voice was hoarse with passion as he advanced towards Merkle.

"So you've had an evening's fun at my expense," he exclaimed.

"That isn't fair, kid," said Merkle quickly. The newspaper man had been observing the progress of his psychological experiment with no little uneasiness. It had been his scientific purpose to administer a mental jolt, violent enough to shatter the shell of lethargic indifference in which Tom's faculties seemed incased. If only the boy could be goaded or stimulated into any normal manifestation of thought or feeling, there would be a chance, Merkle thought, of making a successful appeal to him on some basis, rational or sentimental. He must rely upon his own ready wit to take advantage of whatever opening might present itself.

Well, the first stage of his experiment had been a glittering success. The jolt had been effective. Tom was in a genuine state of feeling — a perfectly normal, shell-shattering burst of passion, there was no doubt of that. His case-hardened faculties had been resolved into a condition of ebullient fluidity. It remained only to mould the plastic mind-stuff to the shape desired.

But, at the critical moment, Merkle's experiment had gone to smash — as an experiment. In scientific work of great delicacy there is always a personal equation, the index of the quality of the observer, to be considered. Merkle, untrained in scientific methods, had neglected to take this elusive factor into account.

"That isn't fair, kid," had been his first impulsive

protest, quietly enough spoken. Then, as he realized what must be passing through Tom's excited brain, a wave of generous resentment swept across his own, his scientific purpose was suddenly submerged, and his words were straight-out and manful.

"I meant all that I said, and I mean it now," he said.

There was a challenge in his voice and manner that would not be put aside. It was at once an affirmation of good faith and a demand for fair play in return. So obvious was its sincerity that Tom's onset was checked and a moment's reflection sufficed to disarm his wrath. Merkle was standing by his offer. If his words meant anything, they meant that. His talk of suicide had been a bluff, perhaps, but it had been prompted by utter friendliness and, if such artifice required apology, Merkle's words supplied it. He had wanted to show Tom, out of his own mouth, what a fool he was about to make of himself. Tom did not concede the success of the demonstration.

"What else was left me?" he argued, their clash forgotten by common consent. "I've disappointed the girl that loved me, I've disappointed my mother's faith in me, and, worst of all, I've disappointed myself. I thought myself fit for the biggest things and found that I couldn't rise above the smallest of them. I was told to go out into the

world of real men and women, and find out what I wanted and what I could do. All I've succeeded in doing is to find out what I don't want and what I can't do."

"Doesn't that prove you're not a failure?" was the cheerful response. Merkle was chuckling inwardly at the outcome of his experiment, wholly failing to realize that, by substituting character for ingenuity at the pinch, he had destroyed its scientific value. Here was Tom, reasoning himself back into his proper senses. Let him talk his head off. It would go hard if he, Merkle, could not outreason a boy.

And yet, it was a happy chance, rather than Merkle's powers of persuasion, that determined the final result in his favor.

"Success," he was saying, "is a process of elimination. When a man has found out what he doesn't want and what he can't do, he has found himself." Tom started at the half-remembered phrase.

"And you," Merkle concluded, "have found yourself in the crucible of experience."

Then, for an instant, he was alarmed. Tom went suddenly white as chalk, and he reeled back with narrowed eyes and hands uplifted as though to shield his face from a flash of blinding light. Merkle caught his elbow to steady him.

"The crucible of experience," Tom repeated faintly. "The crucible —"

He turned an awe-struck face to Merkle and stared at him as if he were some being with uncanny powers.

"Why!" he gasped. "That's what Jane said."

"Of course," said Merkle. "That's why I want you to go back to Fairview. Opportunity isn't geographical. It lies within one's self. It's waiting for you now, if you'll only see it. Nothing but vanity or cowardice will keep you from it."

Tom only half heard him. There was a rapt expression on his face that persisted even after Merkle had ceased to speak. Then there was silence, and their eyes met in a long, steady gaze.

"I'm not a coward," said Tom.

"You'll go," cried Merkle.

Tom looked at him a moment longer. Then, with a swift, impulsive motion, he grasped Merkle's hand.

"Sure," he said.

CHAPTER XXII

MERKLE'S SHIP COMES HOME

TOM'S consent had come so suddenly that Merkle hardly understood how it had been brought about. But he was not a man to waste time in idle conjecture, once his end was gained. Besides, the possibility of anything like a scene made him uncomfortable. In a twinkling he was all business.

"Good boy," he said, shaking Tom's hand briskly. "I've a time table in my room. I'll see how the trains run."

And he stepped quickly through the curtains, leaving Tom standing alone in the center of the room.

For a few moments the boy did not stir. The outside door bell rang loudly, but he did not hear. He threw back his head and shook it vigorously as if to clear it of the dregs of an ugly dream. The door bell rang again, more violently than before, and though its clamorous appeal did not reach Tom's consciousness, it roused him a trifle and he looked about him. His eye fell first upon the unfinished letter. He tore it quickly into small pieces, which he thrust into his pocket. Then he hastily removed

the gas tube from the wall jet and threw it under the bed. He had hardly completed these arrangements when Merkle re-entered, a time table unfolded in his hands.

"There's a pretty good train at eight," he said. "It'll get us there by night. What do you think?"

"I haven't any money," said Tom.

Merkle came to a dead halt, and an expression of disgust spread itself over his face as he remembered how he had given his last dollar, nay, his last dime, to Joe Weinstein.

"Damn!" he exploded.

He felt rapidly through his pockets, though he knew full well it was a hopeless search.

"Neither have I," he said.

"And even if we did have enough for our fare, we couldn't start a newspaper on nothing," Tom reminded him.

"A hunch! Thirteen!" croaked Merkle, with savage irony. He strode across the room to the calendar, tore off the luckless black-ringed page, crumpled it between his hands and hurled it into the waste basket.

"Hell!" he snorted.

"I thought it sounded too good," said Tom gloomily.

"Wait a minute," said Merkle, throwing himself into a chair. "Perhaps I can think of something."

Meantime the door bell had continued to ring at intervals, though, in their excitement, neither had paid any attention to it. Now, in the silence prepared for Merkle's mental labors, they could hear voices in the hall, Mrs. Bannan scolding volubly and Joe doing his best to explain how it happened that he had forgotten his latchkey. The landlady went down the hall at last. They could follow her progress by the creaking of the floor planks. Then there came a guarded knock on the door.

Tom opened it, and Joe stepped into the room, brimming over with indignation.

"What's the matter with you guys?" he complained. "Didn't you hear me ring? I forgot my key and the old lady had to come down and let me in."

"You ought to thank your stars that I don't throw you out of that window," said Merkle, with a truculence that was not wholly counterfeit.

Joe backed up against the door and looked at him with well-feigned alarm. "What getting into you?" he said.

"Where's my money?" demanded Merkle, with growing wrath.

Joe's face cracked into a smile, despite himself.

"Gimme a chance, can't you?" he exclaimed.

"What?" raved Merkle. "You don't mean to say you hit it?"

With maddening deliberation Joe put his hand in

his pocket and drew forth a roll of bills that looked to Merkle as big as a loaf of bread.

"What does it look like?" asked Joe.

Merkle staggered towards him, almost overcome at this sudden turn of fortune.

"Great God!" he cried. "And half of it is mine."

Joe grasped his arm with his free hand and sought to restrain him. "Wait a minute. Let me explain," he cried.

Before he could say another word the door was thrown open without warning and Mrs. Bannan rushed into the room.

"Ain't you men ever going to bed?" she cried angrily. "Do you think you can burn my gas all night?"

And she began turning out gas jets as fast as she could, Joe trying in vain to placate her. "It's all right, mother," he said. "Be a good fellow for once."

She turned upon him threateningly. "If you want to talk, you'll have to do it in the dark," she shrilled. "Remember, all my other people are asleep. If I see those lights going again, I'll put you all out."

And with this ultimatum she stamped heavily out, ignoring Joe's attempts at conciliation. An apprehensive silence followed her departure. The room was still faintly illuminated by stray beams from a

street lamp across the way, and, as their eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness, Merkle, with a grin, motioned to Tom.

"Shut the door, kid," he said.

Tom closed it very softly and returned to the others.

"How much did you get, Joe?" said Merkle, almost in a whisper.

"Enough to open a moving picture show," said Joe, with a triumphant grin. "And I've got the thing all doped out."

"It's the wrong dope," said Merkle. "We don't want a moving picture show. We've got a better proposition."

Joe's fingers tightened on the roll.

"What?" he demanded.

"A newspaper," replied Merkle, in a loud, eager whisper. "We're going to start a sheet in a town that looks like ready money."

"A newspaper?" Joe's face fell. "Where?" he asked, after a moment.

"Fairview, New York," said Merkle.

"Where the hell is that?" asked Joe, to whom everything west of Jersey City was a howling wilderness.

"Where I come from," explained Tom.

Joe eyed him in a manner that was supercilious, if nothing more offensive.

"Not on your life," he said.

"Ss-h-h," hissed Merkle, enforcing silence on Tom, who seemed about to launch an appropriate reply. He pointed to the landlady's room overhead. "Sit down, Joe, and we'll tell you all about it."

He shoved Joe quickly into a chair, and drew up two others beside it for himself and Tom.

"Go ahead," he said. "Explain it to him."

Tightly clutching his roll, Joe settled himself to listen. What boots it to rehearse the reasons, the promises, the warnings, the cajoleries that were poured into his devoted ear? It was two to one, anyhow, and, against Tom's enthusiasm and Merkle's driving arguments, he had never a chance. When the early dawn stole in upon them, they were still talking, but the argument was over. Merkle, a pad on his knees, was busily engaged in figuring out the possibilities and delimitations of a bank-roll that seemed to shrink in the process, interrupting his calculations from time to time to instruct Joe in his duties and obligations as circulation manager of *The Fairview Herald*.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE INVASION OF FAIRVIEW

THEY reached Fairview Saturday night, with their best clothes on their backs and a thousand dollars in their pockets. It had proved impracticable to jump out of New York on the first train in the morning as Merkle had wished.

In the first place it had been necessary for Merkle to consult with a Park Row friend of his, a newspaper broker, who had marvelous bargains to offer in the way of second-hand presses and other print shop equipment, and who was cheerful about taking notes when he couldn't get cash. Then there was the press association that supplied country papers with "boiler plate insides." Merkle had a friend there also, who made things easy for him. He had to call around at the office of the *Evening Orb* too, to resign and to collect what salary was due him and to say good-bye to the boys. It was surprising how friendly everybody was and how many good luck wishes he took away with him. Even the cashier, a grumpily important personage who never seemed happy unless he could find a pretext for holding up expense accounts, wrung his hand at parting and was sorry to see him go.

Altogether Merkle spent a pleasant and profitable day. He had never held so good an opinion of New York and New Yorkers as now, when he was about to bid them good-bye. He ventured to intimate as much to Summerfield of the *The World*, with whom he was having a farewell drink, and was promptly reminded that nine out of every ten Americans you meet in New York come from the West and South, Summerfield stoutly maintaining the theory that the percentage of the native born was not large enough to corrupt the mass.

As for Tom and Joe, they had enough to keep them busy. Encouraged by the luck of the 13th, Joe undertook to collect certain moneys that were long owing to him, and actually succeeded in dragging a few dollars out of the hands of reluctant debtors, which comforted him greatly.

For Joe, it developed, had not played his hunch of the preceding night according to the strict rules for such cases made and provided. After placing his whole stake on the "13" and cashing, as was to be expected, he had been unable to resist the temptation to venture a portion of his own share of the winnings on the prospects of a "repeater," a thing he had a perfect right to do, but which his experience should have told him, was pushing a good thing too far. This time the "13" failed him and Joe unwilling to pocket his loss, was under the necessity of seeing the thing through. For a time

fortune and his hopes had wavered, then a succession of losses, inciting him to reckless play, had swept away the greater portion of his winnings. But luck turned at last just as despair was clutching at his heart strings, and he had left the table with several hundred dollars more than his "hunch" entitled him to. He had had a bad hour, but, as Joe put it, in relating the story to Merkle and Tom: "I got the money."

It was a story he would gladly have left untold, for he felt that it was a revelation of his own moral weakness. But the fatness of his roll had to be accounted for and he confessed. Merkle had been unwilling to add the surplus to the common fund, holding that, as the extra risk had all been Joe's, his should be the extra winnings. But Joe had stoutly held the contrary and had persisted in his contrariness to the extent of flatly refusing to enter into any partnership which should not include the total resources of the trio. Tom's share included little except the use of his Fairview home, and he felt uncomfortably like a pauper at the sight of all this wealth, but the others succeeded in convincing him that, as he had originated the idea which was to make them all affluent, he was certainly entitled to an equal share in the venture.

And then, all three together had made a shopping tour. Merkle had insisted that this be done. It was his notion that the trio must descend upon Fair-

view looking like "ready money," and that the cash spent on clothes and other personal furnishings would be the most effective part of their investment. His counsels prevailed.

Merkle, who was to represent the editorial dignity of the new establishment, was outfitted all in sober black, including a frock coat that hung about him with the classic impressiveness of a toga.

Tom, the publisher and financial man, was a picture of prosperous elegance in soft gray business attire.

Joe's predilection for checks and vivid colors could not be entirely repressed, but his display was reduced to a minimum with which Merkle professed himself satisfied. When they sailed forth from the Bannan boarding house for the last time, on their way to the train, Mrs. Bannan was ready to weep at seeing so much of prosperity and distinction deserting her roof and board, and when Merkle, on the sidewalk, lifted his glossy silk hat to her in parting salute, she fled to her room and would not be comforted, not even by the faithful Leitz.

It must be said that none of the Bannanites had been taken into the confidence of the trio as to the fashion of their sudden enrichment. Merkle, with some difficulty, had succeeded in making Joe realize the Fairview point of view on gambling hells, a point of view which, considered in the abstract,

Merkle upheld. So it was agreed that the manner of their capitalization should remain a secret, and such it has remained unto this day.

The long journey across the Empire State passed swiftly. Their fellow passengers, whiling away the weary hours with scenery and literature, gazed enviously at the three men, of types so diverse, who yet seemed to have so much of common interest to talk about. Tom alone, and he only as they neared Fairview, seemed a trifle disturbed, and Merkle who fancied he knew what was passing in the boy's mind, took pains to engage him in an intricate discussion of ways and means, with such success that Tom forgot for a while the plunge he was nerving himself to take.

It was only when they were within sight of the village that he remembered.

He had happened to glance from the window as the engine whistled loudly for a crossing. They were whizzing by the Hemingway farm, scene of the never-to-be-forgotten slaughter of the black pigs. The picture rose sharply before his mind's eye, just as he had seen it across the radiator of his automobile on that memorable morning, and his muscles drew taut as if he was grasping the steering wheel once more. Again he felt the shock of collision and heard the farmer's taunting words, and then, in swift succession, came all the episodes of that October day, when he had taken up the gauntlet

fate threw down to him and gone forth confidently to tilt with fortune.

What a mess he had made of everything. His lips curled with wholesome self-contempt at the thought. Well, he still had a chance to make good, thanks to his two good friends, and he must not fail them. He set his jaws hard as the train slowed for the Fairview stop, and he was ready to take his medicine.

After all, it was nothing so terrible. Merkle nodded to Joe to go ahead, and himself brought up the rear as they emerged upon the platform. There was the usual Saturday night convention on hand, a mixture of ordinary platform loafers and of townspeople of the better sort, assembled to welcome returning relatives or friends. Tom knew every face, and met with urgent greetings on every hand, but Joe and Merkle hustled him through the crowd and into one of the waiting hacks and away.

A telegram had warned Mrs. Wilson of their coming, and, after the first greetings between Tom and his mother, and when introductions had been duly accomplished, Merkle took charge of the situation. Supper was waiting for them, and while they plied their forks, Merkle had so much to say of Tom, and of Tom's plans for the newspaper, and of the good luck that had been his and Joe's to become acquainted with Tom and thus be enabled to unite their fortunes with his, that Tom's mother was

proud and delighted and fell in love with Merkle in five minutes and wondered greatly at his wisdom. And Tom, secretly ashamed for himself, could not help loving Merkle either when he saw his mother's beaming face and realized all that his friend was doing for her happiness and for his.

Joe did his best too, but he was a sort of creature Mrs. Wilson had never come in contact with before, and she found it a trifle difficult to understand his New Yorkese. Nevertheless he too seemed very fond of Tom, as nearly as she could make out his meaning, and very grateful to be admitted to personal and business association with him, and Mrs. Wilson adopted him into her family on that account and began to find him very amusing, when his remarks were properly translated.

Next day was Sunday, with nothing to do but go to church, an ordeal Tom had been dreading, because everybody he knew would be there, including Jane and her father.

Joe was invited to go along, but balked. He had no objections, he explained, to doing business with Christians or even to associating with them on a friendly basis during the six days of the week when Christianity didn't cut much ice; but he had conscientious scruples against mingling with them in their moments of religious activity. There being no synagogue in the village, Joe was allowed to stay at home.

But Tom and Merkle occupied seats in Mrs. Wilson's pew, very near the front, and fairly divided attention with the minister, whose sermon dealt, in a rather dreary vein, with the vanity of worldly success.

When the service had ended Mrs. Wilson must needs introduce Mr. Merkle to the minister. It proved that both gentlemen were products of the same Western University, and when the clergyman ascertained, in the course of his questionings, that Merkle had acquired the degree of Ph. D. from their common alma mater, he immediately began calling him Dr. Merkle and insisted upon it, and introduced him as such to several of the pillars of the congregation, who were much impressed with Dr. Merkle and were indeed delighted that a gentleman of such erudition and with such an air of metropolitan distinction, was to settle down among them in order to provide Fairview with the chief thing it lacked — a newspaper of the sort that the village would be proud to possess.

Merkle accepted the honors thrust upon him with charming urbanity. It may be remarked in passing that, having been introduced to Fairview as Dr. Merkle, the title stuck, and he was obliged to live up to it ever after. Mrs. Wilson began calling him Doctor on the way home from church and, except to Tom, he was never plain Merkle again. Joe, who might have been expected to remain loyal to

the old order of things, took great delight in referring to his friend as "the old doctor" in the third person and dubbing him plain "Doc" in the second. He seemed to feel that the title justified the editorial insignia of frock coat and silk hat, both of which he had found it hard to reconcile to his sense of the eternal fitness.

Tom did not see Jane that day. The Judge's pew was unoccupied. His eyes searched furtively for her elsewhere, but in vain. He gleaned presently, from something a gossiping neighbor said to his mother, that Jane and her father were away on a visit, somewhere in the West, and he did not know whether to be sorry or glad, for, although his eyes hungered for a glimpse of her, he dreaded their first face-to-face meeting, now that she was pledged in some fashion to another. And that other, Hez Jenks! It was all so incredible that he almost allowed himself to think of it at times as a hideous dream.

It rained and drizzled all of Monday and Tuesday and at Joe's earnest entreaty, they kept to the house. Joe, in his lifetime, had sold everything, from shoestrings to mining stock. He had been a keen student of business psychology and, even if his methods were empirical, his conclusions were generally sound. He vowed that it would be ruinous to start out in such weather to sell Fairview a newspaper. So long as the skies remained leaden

and overcast, he argued, just so long would the minds of Fairview's leading business men continue to be gloomy, depressed and unresponsive. The success of their enterprise depended upon gaining the advertising support of said leading business men. Very well. Wait until they became gay and persuasive again — when it had stopped raining.

Joe's wisdom could be neither gainsaid nor resisted, and they waited as patiently as might be, though Tom, in the throes of nervous reaction after the ordeal of the last two or three days, found his enforced inaction almost intolerable at first. But the necessity of keeping up appearances before his mother enabled him to hold himself in hand. Then too, he found himself getting interested in Joe's theories of salesmanship, and together they drew up a general plan of attack, with variations to suit the idiosyncrasies of every important man on their list. Tom supplied the information, Joe the expedients.

When the skies cleared at last, Tom plunged into the work with a determination that was proof against rebuff.

Merkle, despite a painful attack of rheumatism, brought on by the dampness, set him an example of cheerful pluck which would have shamed him into a like display, if such incentive had been needed. But Tom was actuated by motives stronger than any that Merkle could supply, motives so obscure

that Tom himself did not so much as acknowledge their existence, not, at least, in his waking thoughts. He only knew that he leaped from his bed each morning with a resistless impulse to be at work, to be making good — an impulse that carried him along at a swift, tireless pace which disregarded the length and difficulty of the road and the goal to which it might lead.

It was nearly a month before the first issue of *The Fairview Herald* appeared. After that its ultimate success seemed never in doubt. Nor did Tom's. In those four weeks he had regained his poise and had begun to grasp at the beginnings of something better — a subtle mastery of self and circumstance that was new to his philosophy. It was a quality, the effects of which he had dimly apprehended and envied in men like Merkle, for instance, but of the existence and nature of which he had been alike ignorant.

So Tom and *The Herald* won their way through their respective periods of probation and plugged along together through the Summer and early Fall, accumulating reserve funds against the day when certain obligations should fall due.

CHAPTER XXIV

TOM GOES WALKING

IT fell to Tom himself, in his rôle of publisher, to set *The Herald's* day of reckoning, the day when the newspaper must strike balances and show that it had made good. He fixed upon a day in late October, a day like any other in the office calendar, but which was stamped in red letters upon his own. It was exactly one year from the time of his boastful exit from Fairview. He had made a covenant then — given a boyish promise that was no longer binding, because the consideration had been withdrawn, but it pleased him to carry it out nevertheless.

He had disclosed his purpose to Merkle and Joe, so far as it concerned *The Herald*, and had shaped their labors and his own toward the appointed day. As it drew near, he spoke of it often, with an insistent, mysterious emphasis that impressed them both, so that, though neither of them could fathom his reasons for choosing that day rather than any other, they had both come to look forward to it as something critical and important.

They were surprised therefore when he left the office without a word on the momentous morning,

and did not reappear. They would have been more surprised if they could have followed his movements. He walked rapidly through the village, and out upon the road that led to the lake. Soon he had left the last house in Fairview behind him, had passed the Hemingway farm and entered the valley beyond. Not till then did his pace slacken. Now he slowed to a saunter and began to look about him at the well-remembered countryside, as though he realized for the first time whither his legs had carried him.

It had been an unthinking impulse, born of a sudden fit of restlessness, that had led Tom to snatch up his hat, hurry out of the office, and set forth upon this aimless excursion. Now the fit had been walked off, but it had brought him so far that he decided he might as well go on to the lake.

He was hot and tired when he reached the shore, and he bent his steps involuntarily towards a shaded seat that commanded a good view of the lake. It was a nook where he and Jane had often sat together the summer before and looked out upon the dancing waves and watched the cloud shadows chase one another across the water. He sat there for a long time, his eyes roving lazily over the peaceful scene before him.

A cold breeze from the surface of the lake fanned his hot cheek. A stronger puff set something white to fluttering in the grass near his feet. He stooped

forward and picked up a handkerchief. He looked at it idly for a moment, then an exclamation broke from his lips and he jumped to his feet.

The handkerchief was Jane's! There were her initials in the corner, brodered in a pattern he knew. He examined the handkerchief again, more closely.

It was as white and fresh as though it had just dropped from the owner's hand. It could not have lain long in the grass, not more than a day, at most. Jane must have been here, on the very spot where he stood, yesterday at the latest, perhaps this very morning. She must have motored out here. She must have sat in this very seat, and —

And with Hez Jenks!

The thought was maddening. It sent the blood surging furiously to his head. Was it possible that Jane had brought Hez here, to their old place? Did the old days mean nothing to her now? He began to look about him, for traces of Hez's presence, footprints perhaps. When he realized how he was playing the spy, he stopped, ashamed, and deliberately resumed his former attitude on the bench.

A minute's reflection helped him. It could not be. It wasn't like Jane to do such a thing as that. She must have come alone. And, if she had — he did not trust himself to follow the thought to a conclusion.

But he began to remember things. He had no-

ticed that Jane often drove about alone now in the Judge's big car. Sometimes she was with girl friends. Sometimes he had seen her with Hez Jenks, but — the significance of it flashed across his mind for the first time — she never rode in the driver's seat with Hez, always in the tonneau. It had never been like that when Tom was at the wheel.

He rose again, and began to pace excitedly up and down a little strip of smooth beach, unmindful of the hot sun. For the first time since that terrible night in New York, when he had received the letter from home which told of Jane's forthcoming marriage, he dared to allow his thoughts to dwell upon the whole miserable affair. Now that he was in his right mind and could look at the thing sanely and soberly, it was not believable that Jane was to marry Hez Jenks. In fact, at the unconscious bottom of his soul, he had come to disbelieve it with a certainty that had given him comfort.

There must have been some basis for the report, of course, just what he could not imagine. Judge Belknap was probably at the bottom of it, somehow. Of course, it must have happened that way. Jane had been bullied or beguiled into something like assent to his plans. That was all. The conviction came to him suddenly and surely, as he walked up and down, though he felt that he had known it in some fashion all the time.

He had hardly met Jane since his return, except

as strangers meet. He had not sought her. When, on one or two occasions, they had happened upon each other at some village gathering, they had exchanged only the most casual of greetings, not a dozen words in all. He saw Hez almost every day. Hez had begun by dodging across the street when he saw Tom approaching, but, when he found that there was nothing to be feared from Tom, he grew bolder, and spoke to him as if nothing had happened between them.

Tom had not rebuffed him. He had rather liked to see Hez about. Now he knew why. It was not the loss of Jane — that was bad enough — but the thought that she was to be consigned to the arms of Hez Jenks, that had been the cruellest pang of his night of torture. And, the first time he saw Hez Jenks slinking across the street after his return to Fairview, it had begun to be impossible to regard him seriously. Hez was not a figure to inspire jealous rage. So Tom had come to look upon him with something like toleration. If he could have known that it was Hez, who had slyly set afloat the report which had caused that letter to be written, he might have been less serene.

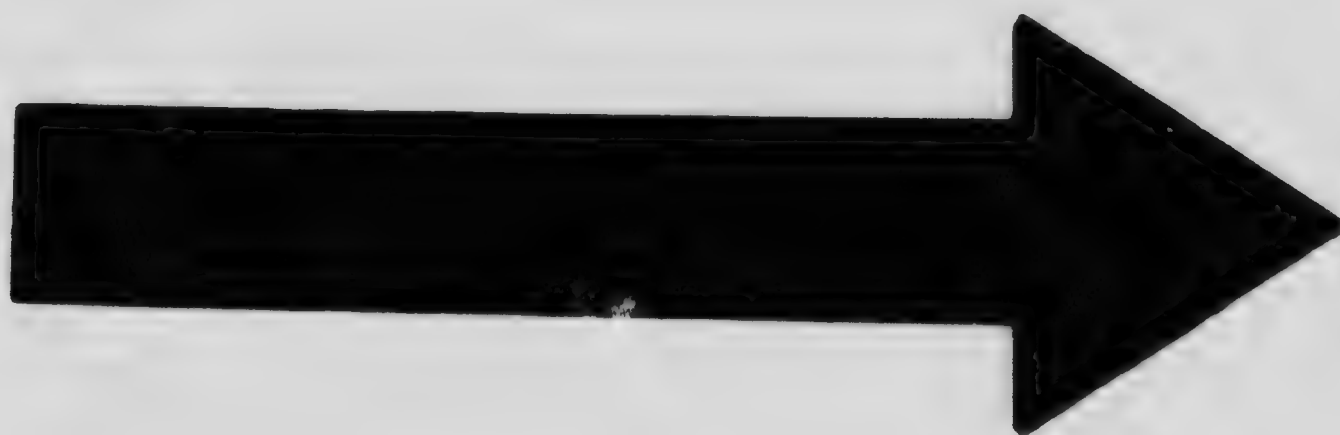
Tom looked at the sun. It was near noon, and he decided to go on to a little hotel on the lake shore and have luncheon there before he began the long walk back to Fairview. He fared sumptuously on fried chicken. Afterwards he sat on the veranda

for an hour chatting with the landlord, and it was three o'clock before he roused himself to the necessity of getting back to the office. He had forgotten what an important day it was to have been for *The Herald* and that the boys would be wondering what had become of him. As a matter of fact, Tom knew almost to a cent how the business stood, and that it wouldn't take him ten minutes to strike a balance and render his report to his partners. But he rose to his feet with a lazy yawn, bade the chatty landlord good-day, and started back.

There was no need to hurry, and he went along leisurely, enjoying the quiet beauty of the afternoon and, for the first time in many months, finding his own thoughts no bad company. He was in his old buoyant mood again, the world looked good to him. As for the future — he refrained from thinking of that, but hope was singing a small, inarticulate song in his breast, and he whistled in harmony with it as he marched along.

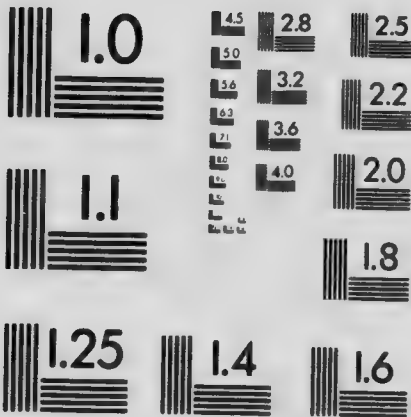
The highway was deserted that afternoon. He met nobody. Except for an occasional solitary figure, working in the distant fields, he saw no sign of human life until he turned the corner of the road at the Hemingway farm. There, hanging across the gate, lounged his ancient enemy, watching his approach.

Tom's impulse was to walk by without a word, but Farmer Hemingway grinned in friendly fashion



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as he drew near and called out to him. Tom stopped and the farmer held out his hand.

"Hello, Mr. Wilson," he said. "I've ben intendin' to come and see you. The missus says I gotter subscribe fer your paper."

"Our subscription terms," said Tom suspiciously, "are cash in advance."

Without hesitation Farmer Hemingway drew forth his wallet and produced the price. "There," he said. "The missus seen your paper over to her brother Henry's house last week and she's bound and determined fer us to take it too. Send it right along, will you?"

Tom inquired politely after the welfare of his new patron's family and live stock, invited him to visit *The Herald* office, and went on his way well pleased. A year ago Tom had been the butt of the farmer's ridicule. To-day the farmer called him Mr. Wilson.

When Tom reached the office at last, he found that the others had left for the day. He set to work at once, for it was growing late and he wanted to get home by supper time. First of all, with a grin of satisfaction, he entered up Farmer Hemingway's payment, and put his name on the mailing list.

Tom's task must have taken him longer than he had expected, for he did not appear at the cottage in time for supper, and, when Merkle had completed his meal and risen with a sigh of contentment

to light his post-prandial pipe, the head of the house was still missing. Merkle seated himself comfortably in a rocker by the empty fireplace and watched Joe, who was still busy with his knife and fork. Mrs. Wilson entered from the kitchen and rescued the remainder of the pie, upon which Joe seemed to be contemplating fresh inroads.

"I could stand an encore on that pie," said Joe, following its retreat with regretful eyes.

"I'm saving the rest for Tom," said Mrs. Wilson. "Huckleberry is his favorite."

Joe felt that he was rebuked, and was silent. Mrs. Wilson turned to Merkle with an anxious look. "Did he say when he was coming?" she asked.

"He'll be along pretty soon," said Merkle with cheerful evasiveness. "He had some special work at the office that he wanted to straighten out."

Mrs. Wilson carried the pie to the sideboard, where it should be safe from Joe, then returned to the table.

"It's a shame the way that poor boy has to work," she complained. "Can't even come home to his supper on time. And he looks dreadful, too. Almost worn out."

She looked accusingly, first at Joe, whose mouth was too full for comfortable utterance, then at Merkle, who was reading a paper and puffing placidly at his pipe.

"I don't think he looks so rotten," said Merkle. He was comparing the new Tom, radiant with health and enthusiasm, with the Tom of those last few weeks in New York and thinking what a marvelous change a few months had wrought in the boy. Though Merkle did not realize it, the change in himself was fully as obvious.

But Tom's mother, not being in the secret of his thoughts, resented the apparent carelessness of his reply, and retorted with a sharpness unusual for her.

"Couldn't expect you to notice it," she said, starting for the kitchen with a tray of dishes. "If some folks would do their share of work, my boy would get time to eat something."

"Do I get anything to drink with this?" Joe called plaintively after her.

"I'll bring you a glass of water," said Mrs. Wilson shortly, and went out.

At the mention of water Joe rose from the table with a puckered mouth. He turned appealingly to Merkle, who was watching him with amusement over the top of his paper.

"Can you beat it?" he asked. He stretched himself and yawned the yawn of complete boredom. "Gee!" he exclaimed, "I wish I was back where I could see the lights."

"Oh, stick it out," growled Merkle, returning to his paper. But Joe would not be put down. He was in a mood to wail and wail he would, whether anybody sympathized or not.

"On the level, old pal," he said. "It has my nanny. I feel like I was doing time."

"This country thing is just what you needed," replied Merkle. "Why," he continued in flattering tones, "you're looking better than you ever did in your life."

Joe smiled a languid acknowledgment of the compliment while he proceeded to roll a cigarette.

"Oh, I'm there with the fatal beauty, all right," he conceded. "But, what's the use? There isn't a skirt in this town I'd fall for."

He lighted his cigarette, but after one deep inhalation, tossed it impatiently into the fireplace.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, in a voice of deep yearning. "When I think of the nifty gals chasing around Forty-second street, and the careless way I used to pass them up — honest to God, I get remorse."

"They'll still be there when you go back," said Merkle, in a conscientious effort to soothe.

"Not the same ones," mourned Joe, refusing to be comforted. He walked over to Merkle. "Say," he asked appealingly, "ain't you ever lonesome for the Big Lane?"

"Not me," said Merkle. "I'm happier than I've been for a long time."

"You mean that you're going to stick to this tank?" continued Joe.

"As long as God lets me," replied Merkle heartily.

Joe looked him over critically. It was such a look as an alienist might bestow upon a case that promised interesting peculiarities.

"Nothing like that in my family," he said at last. "I'd rather be a ripple on Broadway than a whole tidal wave up here. And to think," he moaned, "I came up here of my own free will! Gee! That's what gets me."

"I thought you liked the place," said Merkle. "It's nice and quiet."

"Quiet?" cried Joe in wrathful disgust. "Say, Merkle, it's so quiet that, when the mosquitos play around my window at night, I think they're burglars trying to break in."

"Never mind, Joe," said Merkle with a laugh. "You'll soon have so much money that you won't know what to do with it. That Belknap story ought to double our circulation."

"What does the kid think about it?" asked Joe, with a cautious glance towards the kitchen door.

"I don't think he knows," replied Merkle slowly. "At least he hasn't mentioned it."

The two men looked at each other gravely for a moment, but before either could speak again, there was a sound of footsteps on the porch, and they both turned their faces to the door expecting to see Tom Wilson.

CHAPTER XXV

BELKNAP SENDS HIS COMPLIMENTS

BUT it wasn't Tom. Instead, the elongated figure of Hez Jenks appeared in the doorway and teetered there on its toes as if its owner were doubtful of the reception that awaited it inside. Joe turned to Merkle with a swift wink, and strolled forward to welcome the visitor, whose errand both men had instantly divined.

Hez peered apprehensively about the room, then, seeing no signs of his arch-enemy, stepped inside, and doffed his chauffeur's cap and goggles in a stiff salute.

"Howdy," he said. His eyes shifted uneasily from Joe to Merkle and back to Joe again. "Tom Wilson at home?"

"Hello, Joshua," cried Joe in his most cordial tones. He walked up to Hez and circled silently around him, inspecting his automobile costume from every angle with an expression of delighted admiration. "What's the big noise?" he asked.

Hez, suspicious of Joe's intentions, had kept his face to the foe by the simple expedient of revolving upon his heels. Now, seeing that Joe's designs were pacific, he repeated his question sharply.

"Judge Belknap sent me over to see Tom Wilson," he said. "Where is he?"

"Over at the office counting his money," replied Joe, with an airy wave of the hand and a provoking grin.

"Guess he ain't got much to count," sniffed Hez.

"Guess again," said Joe. "He only needs about thirty cents more to have a million dollars."

Hez turned from Joe to Merkle. "I have a message for Tom Wilson," he said, "but perhaps you will do as well. Judge Belknap says that piece you put in the paper about him is criminal libel, and, if it ain't retracted in the next issue, he'll have you all arrested."

Hez delivered the Judge's ultimatum in tones of high-pitched defiance, looking the while at Merkle, as if he expected that worthy to crumple at his feet and utter loud cries for mercy. But Merkle who had survived the wrath of greater personages than Judge Belknap, only smiled pleasantly. Joe cut in.

"Hand this guy a rain check," he said impatiently. But Merkle said quietly to Hez:

"You tell the old man, if he thinks he's got any kick coming, he'd better come around himself."

"During office hours," supplemented Joe. "That goes for you, too," he added.

Hez deemed it unwise to pursue the subject in the face of Joe's truculence. Besides he had a scheme of his own in mind, and he didn't care to risk being

ordered out of the house before he could speak of it.

"I got a personal complaint to make," he said.

"You forgot to put in that piece I give you about my engagement to Miss Belknap."

"Did you look in the sporting column?" asked Joe, blandly.

"'Tain't in there nohow," snapped Hez.

"Don't see how we let that get by," said Joe.

"But we'll run it in the next issue. Fifty cents please."

Hez looked at Joe's outstretched hand and at Joe's expectant eye with manifestations of annoyance.

"Fifty cents!" he echoed. "Why! This is news."

Joe shook his head decisively. "Come across, Josh," he said. "Kick in with the jingle. I'm sorry, but we can't marry you for less than fifty cents."

"You must think I'm a sucker," sneered Hez, whose face had been slowly turning brick red under Joe's mocking insistence. "Fifty cents, huh! Guess you're a Jew, ain't you. We ain't got none of them in this village."

"That's why it's a village," explained Joe, with an urbane bow.

Hez turned angrily to the door. "I'll go over and tell Tom Wilson," he cried. "He mightn't be so fresh."

"Did you ever see so many peevies in one town?" inquired Joe throwing up his hands in a hopeless gesture as Hez made his way out. Mrs. Wilson entered from the kitchen just as Hez disappeared down the front steps.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"The village detective," replied Joe, "looking for the kid."

Mrs. Wilson, who knew by experience that Joe's explanations were usually more unintelligible than his original statements, forbore to question him further. But the reference to Tom renewed her anxiety.

"I wish he'd come before his supper gets all cold," she said. "What do you suppose is keeping him?"

Merkle, to whom the question was chiefly addressed, rose promptly from his seat and walked over to her.

"Want me to go see?" he asked.

"No, no," she replied hurriedly. "He wouldn't like it. I suppose," she went on half-apologetically, "I oughtn't to worry him when he has such a lot of things on his mind. But I do wish he had somebody to help him." She looked hard at Joe. "Somebody who had his interest at heart," she added, with emphasis.

Joe, leaning against the wall near the door, lifted his shoulders in a deprecatory shrug.

"Outside of that I'm all right," he ventured.

"We each have our separate department to look after, mother," said Merkle, with the air of grave kindness which he always assumed when Tom's mother was in her moods. "You mustn't blame Joe if he gets through first."

"I don't see why Tom's work should be so much harder," persisted Tom's mother. "It's perfectly wonderful how he manages to do so much."

"It certainly is," assented Merkle, and was proceeding to sound Tom's praises in a manner that brought a pleased smile to his mother's face, when Tom himself ran up the steps and hurried into the room, the incarnation of youthful health and energy.

"Hello, boys," he cried. "Had your supper, I suppose. That's right. No use waiting for me. Hello, mother —"

He tossed his hat into a chair and kissed her, while Joe watched him with a sympathetic eye.

"Poor fellow," he said sadly, in tones loud enough to reach Mrs. Wilson's ears. "Looking bad, isn't he?"

Mrs. Wilson was too busy for the moment being kissed to make immediate reply, and Tom, seeing that something was amiss, spoke quickly.

"Hope I haven't put you out," he said to his mother. "A lot of things I had to fix up to-night."

"I was beginning to think you'd never come,"

she replied, with querulous tenderness. "You look all worn out."

Tom laughed heartily. "Nonsense," he said. "I'm feeling fine."

"I hope you don't feel any better than you look," grumbled Joe. "First thing we know you'll be posing around the country as a white hope and we'll be hunting for another publisher."

"Sit right down, dear," said Mrs. Wilson, ignoring Joe's remark. She bustled about Tom at the table. "I'm afraid everything is cold now, but I couldn't help it."

"Anything will do," said Tom, unthinkingly, as he took his place at the table. "I'm not very hungry."

"You poor boy," said his mother, with a triumphantly reproachful look at the others. "I just know you're overdoing it."

She hurried away to the kitchen. Merkle went back to his chair in the chimney corner. Joe seated himself at the table across from Tom. There was an expectant silence.

"Well," said Tom, "I have it all straightened out."

"How do we stand," asked Merkle.

"Over four hundred to the good," replied Tom. "Our plant all paid for and not a bill out against us."

Merkle smiled a smile of satisfaction. Joe twisted uneasily in his chair.

"That four hundred?" he inquired. "Is it red coin?"

Tom nodded. "Net profit," he said.

"Fine," said Joe.

"Not so bad for a start," growled Merkle.

There was another period of silence, broken by Tom.

"The question now," he suggested, "is, what to do with it."

"Cut it three ways, of course," said Joe quickly.

"How about getting the new press?" This from Merkle's corner.

"We need it badly," said Tom.

Joe jumped to his feet. "Nix on that improvement stuff," he expostulated. "Me for the big dividend."

"I hate to disappoint you, Joe," said Tom, after a momentary pause, in which he and Merkle exchanged glances. "But I think we ought to enlarge the plant as soon as possible. The fact that we have been able to make good with the old stuff shows what we could do with an up-to-date press. We could make it twice as big and throw off twice as many."

"That's the dope," said Merkle. "I'm with the kid."

Joe, taken by surprise at this unexpected coalition, entered vehement protest.

"You guys give me a pain," he exclaimed. "We work our heads off to pile up four hundred bucks, and now you want to put it all into some more junk."

"It'll pay for itself in no time," argued Tom.

"Surest thing you know," assented Merkle.

Joe looked appealingly from one to the other, then sank dejectedly into a chair.

"All right," he said, in tones that indicated that it was anything but all right in his estimation. "I can see myself beating it for home on the trucks."

Tom and Merkle looked anxiously at each other. Merkle, especially, was worried at Joe's implied threat of desertion, for he knew better than Tom how homesick Joe had become, and how, now that the novelty of their venture had worn off, the simple pleasures of village life palled upon him. Before either could trust himself to reply, Mrs. Wilson returned from the kitchen and placed Tom's supper before him. She regarded the conferees with disfavor.

"Now how do you suppose he's going to eat if you talk to him all the time," she scolded. "No wonder he's getting thin."

"Now, mother —" Tom began.

"I won't say another word, dear," she interrupted quickly. "Only I do wish you would look

after your health. Would you like some cold tea?"

"Just a glass of water," said Tom. She went back into the kitchen.

Joe surveyed Tom's dainty meal with a critical eye.

"You're the star here, all right," he grumbled, with a grin at Merkle. "We didn't have any of that, did we, Doc?"

"Help yourself," said Tom, busy with his napkin.

"Haven't room for it now," confessed Joe reluctantly, and contented himself with munching a pickle.

"Do you remember what the estimate was on that new stuff?" asked Merkle.

"Not exactly," replied Tom. "But here's their letter. Read it."

Merkle glanced through the letter. "Three hundred and fifty down and the balance in notes," he announced.

"That's easy enough," said Tom. "What do you think?"

"I'll go along," replied Merkle. They both looked at Joe, who remained stubbornly silent.

"How about it, Joe?" asked Tom.

"We agreed upon two-thirds vote, didn't we?" asked Joe, after a pause.

"But we'd like you to feel satisfied," said Tom.

"That's always the way," replied Joe, whose irritation was fast fading, but who felt it necessary to be consistent. "Every time I see enough coin in sight to make a getaway, you fellows put the lock on again. All right." He sighed mournfully. "I'll trail along."

"Good!" exclaimed Tom. "Then we're all agreed."

"You'd better send in the order before Joe changes his mind," observed Merkle, with a grin.

"I'll attend to it the first thing in the morning," Tom assured him. "By Jove, boys," he went on impulsively, dropping his fork and beaming across the table. "You don't know how good this makes me feel."

"I'm glad somebody's happy," murmured Joe, dismally.

"When I think of all we've accomplished in a few months," said Tom, "I almost feel as if we'd made good already. And I owe it all to you fellows. You've been perfect bricks to stick. Especially Joe."

He turned to Joe with his most engaging smile. "I know how hard it must have been for you," he said, "and you haven't squealed once."

Joe's ill humor could not maintain itself before this ingenuous outburst. "Oh," he said, with a slow smile, "I've made a little wish once or twice."

"Don't thank me," said Merkle gruffly. "I like it here."

"Yes," grumbled Joe, who had risen from his chair and gone over towards the door. "It's so nice and quiet."

Tom returned to his supper and Merkle to his paper, but both jumped to their feet at a loud exclamation from Joe and the sound of a woman's voice which said:

"Oh, I beg your pardon."

Tom clutched at the back of his chair to steady himself as he turned slowly towards the door to face the speaker. Jane had come! She had come at last! His heart was bounding madly at the sound of her voice. He could hardly resist the impulse to rush towards her. But he mastered himself in an instant, and, when their eyes met, there was no expression in his own save that of friendly greeting.

There was no answering gleam in Jane's. She stood stiffly erect, just inside the door. She was gripping a newspaper in her hand. Her face was a frigid, inflexible mask.

CHAPTER XXVI

JANE MAKES A DISCOVERY

THERE was an awkward pause. Tom, taken by surprise at Jane's hostile attitude, was jarred for an instant out of his self-possession. Merkle, watching his young friend closely, saw the faint smile fade from his face, to be replaced by a look of blank perplexity. Joe had eyes for nobody but the pretty girl in the doorway.

"Come in, Jane," said Tom at last, breaking a silence which was fast becoming embarrassing to everybody but Joe. "You know Mr. Merkle and Mr. Weinstein? Miss Belknap, gentlemen."

"I haven't had the pleasure," said Jane, with the slightest permissible nod to each. "How do you do?"

Merkle returned Jane's nod with his best bow. Joe smiled on her approvingly.

"Sit down," continued Tom, again at his ease. He placed a chair for her. "I'll call mother. I suppose it's her you want to see."

"No," said Jane, coolly ignoring his invitation. "I wanted to see you — if you can spare me a moment."

"Certainly," said Tom, opening his eyes wide at

this strangely put request. If he could spare her a moment! What could she mean? Jane had held the newspaper towards him as she spoke, in explanation of her errand. He saw that she carried a copy of *The Herald*, but, as he knew nothing of the Belknap story, it afforded him no clew to the mystery of her behavior.

Merkle promptly took Joe by the arm and marched him across the floor to a door that led to a side room. He surmised what was coming, and he thought it best to let Tom and Jane have it out between themselves. No telling what fortunate outcome might be expected if these two young things were left alone together.

"We'll get out," he announced, keeping a firm grasp on Joe, who seemed inclined to stay.

"Don't go boys," said Tom, politely.

"We have some stuff to go over," replied Merkle, with plausible invention. "We'll be in here if you want us. Come on, Joe."

"Gee, Doc, how did I ever come to overlook that?" murmured Joe to Merkle. He lingered to cast another admiring glance at Jane, but Merkle dragged him abruptly into the other room and closed the door on further comment.

Jane watched them out. When the door had closed behind them, she turned with haughty deliberation to Tom, and, for the first time since she had entered the room, deigned to look at him attentively.

The effect was not quite what she had anticipated — on either herself or Tom.

She felt herself unexpectedly at a loss. Certain blistering phrases, in which she had thought to embody her opinion of Tom's conduct and character, by way of preface to her just demands, died upon her lips. They seemed suddenly unavailable, not to say absurd.

For Jane, always methodical, even in the flood tide of her indignation, had not entered Tom Wilson's home without a well considered plan. She knew just what she intended to say, also just what answers she intended Tom to make. It was to be something like this. First of all she would turn the impudent boy Tom over her knee, figuratively speaking, and give him a spanking he would remember till his dying day. When, under the lash of her scorn, he whined for mercy, then, and not till then, was he to be permitted to beg her forgiveness for the great wrong he had committed, and to offer such feeble amends as lay in his power to make. The amends she would accept. The forgiveness — well, that was the only part of her plan she had left unsettled. It would largely depend, of course, upon the sincerity of Tom's contrition.

But now Jane's plan was all confusion in an instant, and Jane also. For this man, who confronted her so calmly, was not the Tom Wilson she knew — the boy she had come to spank. Tom Wilson had

passed out of the spanking age. She knew that the moment she looked into his eyes. Irresponsibility sparkled there no longer. There was a subtle impress of maturity upon his brow. As by a flash of intuition she realized that somewhere, somehow, without her aid, Tom Wilson had found himself.

And she had lost him. He had slipped out of her grasp. Not that it mattered.

He was wholly unabashed. He was standing almost across the room and he made no move to approach her, but waited in an attitude of courteous expectancy, until his guest might be pleased to speak, a thing Jane was finding it increasingly difficult to attempt. His attitude irritated her. It seemed to demand explanations — of her unannounced coming, her arrogant demeanor. She made a painful effort to speak and stamped her foot in annoyance when she failed. She was in serious danger of losing her temper entirely, when Tom came to her aid.

"I'm awfully glad to see you, Jane," he said quietly. "I was beginning to think we never would see each other. You are looking fine."

His kindly attempt to set her at her ease did not diminish Jane's vexation.

"Thank you," she retorted. "I haven't come here to exchange compliments."

Tom did not attempt to conceal his astonishment at this rebuff. "Has anything happened?" he in-

quired anxiously. He came a step nearer. "If there is anything I can do —"

His pretended solicitude, for such she deemed it, was more than Jane could bear. She burst forth in angry appeal.

"Why are you persecuting my father?" she cried.

It was not the denunciation she had planned. It came perilously near being entreaty — an involuntary tribute, rendered to the new quality she recognized in Tom. The fact was an added bitterness to Jane.

Tom was frankly bewildered. He looked at Jane as if he suspected for a moment that she had taken leave of her senses.

"That's a joke, isn't it?" he asked, mildly.

"If it is," she snapped, "I haven't enough sense of humor to appreciate it."

"I can't imagine anybody persecuting Judge Belknap," remarked Tom.

Jane held out the obnoxious copy of *The Herald*.

"This," she said, "is the last issue of your paper."

Tom nodded. "I presume you have read it," she added sarcastically, as he betrayed no evidence of an enlightened conscience.

"Not very carefully," replied Tom. "You see," he explained, "I'm only the business manager. Doctor Merkle is the editor, but, of course, if there's been any mistake —"

"There's been no mistake," interrupted Jane, waving his excuses aside with his own newspaper, which she had unfolded. "This paragraph—" she pointed to the offensive item—"refers to our most prominent citizen. A member of the council. It accuses him of being in the pay of the railroad and threatens an exposé in the next issue."

Tom heard her through with a look of genuine amazement. She thrust the paper into his hands and watched him as he glanced hastily over the defamatory paragraph. As Jane had said, there could be no mistaking its reference. Judge Belknap was a member of the council. He was the railroad's paid attorney. He was beyond question Fairview's first citizen. Tom slowly folded up the paper and handed it back to her with a troubled look.

"What do you intend to expose?" she demanded, plucking up her courage at sight of his disquietude.

"I don't know," he replied.

"You admit that this refers to father?" she went on, pressing her advantage.

"I'll admit it looks like him," said Tom.

"And you pretend not to know its meaning?"

It was a bitter question, spoken with studied insolence. If she had said in so many words that he was lying, her meaning could not have been plainer. Tom's face grew red, but he confronted her unflinchingly.

"I hadn't seen it before," he said simply.

"I had hoped you would be frank, at least," she returned, with lofty disdain. "I'm sorry to have bothered you."

She turned to go.

"Wait a minute, Jane," said Tom. "You've got me going now. Give me a chance to find out what it's all about."

She was already at the door, but she yielded to his request, she hardly knew why, out of a spirit of perversity, perhaps. She would not admit to herself that she might have done him injustice. Her resentment was still too keen for that. But it was gratifying to see Tom reduced to the rôle of suppliant in his turn. He must care, after all — for her good opinion, at least.

"I wouldn't have cared," she said, "if you had come right out with the charge — whatever it is. Father is quite capable of protecting himself against slander. But, to hide yourself under an insinuation like this — it is cowardly."

Tom looked hurt, but did not reply.

"It isn't what I had expected of you," she concluded with a sigh of disappointment. Tom could gather from that just how high he had stood in her opinion and how far he had fallen.

But he refused to be properly impressed. "I give you my word," he assured her, "I don't know

yet what it means. It must be something the boys have found out lately."

She knew this time that he was speaking the truth, but she was too angry to be fair.

"So then," she said, "without knowing anything about it, you immediately jump to the conclusion that my father has done wrong."

"Not intentionally, perhaps," he replied gravely. "But you know yourself that his methods are not always above criticism."

His answer discomfited her once more. Tom had expressed no conclusion as to her father's wrongdoing, a fact which she realized almost before the words were out of her mouth. But she had let them stand, expecting a disclaimer at least. For an instant, she even hoped for some expression of confidence in the Judge's integrity, which should pave the way to a better understanding. But his cool avowal was like a blow in the face. She countered swiftly.

"Why not give him the benefit of your advice?" she suggested.

"Please don't be sarcastic, Jane," said Tom. "I'm awfully sorry this has happened. I always seem to be disappointing you somehow," he continued sadly. "There in the city, when I got rattled and lost my way, and now here at home, where I expected to do so much. The thing I most wanted to

'do was to win back your respect, but, of course, after this —"

He broke off with a hopeless wave of his hand towards the paper, which the girl still held in her hand. Jane was silent. After a slight pause, he went on speaking.

"If you'll give me a moment with Merkle," he said, "I'll find out what it means. Will you join my mother for a moment? She's in there," and he pointed to the kitchen door.

"I'd rather not," said Jane. "She might think —"

She hesitated, and Tom gave her no time to formulate her objections. "You owe it to me now," he said quickly. "I won't keep you long."

He walked up to her, took the paper from her hand and waved her towards the door with it. For an instant she wavered. He took it so easily for granted that she would obey. Then, moved by a sudden impulse she did not stop to analyze, she walked quickly across the room and laid her hand on the latch.

"Thank you," said Tom. She disappeared.

Tom opened the paper and read the inflammatory article with care. It was very short, not more than a dozen lines in all, but it had been penned by a master of English, who knew how to make each word sting. No wonder Jane was angry, or the Judge either. He stood for a moment longer,

thinking. He did not blame Merkle, of course, but the thing must go no further. With an expression of determination on his face, he walked over to Merkle's door and rapped.

"Merkle," he called. "Come here a minute, will you?"

"Sure," boomed Merkle's big voice through the panels.

CHAPTER XXVII

BY A TWO-THIRDS VOTE

“WHAT’S the trouble?” asked Merkle, when he entered the room a moment later. Tom pointed to the Belknap item.

“Miss Belknap has just asked me what this meant,” he said, “and I had to tell her that I didn’t know. It refers to her father, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” replied Merkle. “He’s putting a bill through the council giving that piece of village property at the foot of Main Street to the railroad for their new station. And he’s the attorney for the road.”

“Well?” said Tom.

“It doesn’t go with his position as president of the Board of Supervisors. It’s a downright steal of public property. It’ll make a good story.”

“You mustn’t run it,” said Tom.

“What?” exclaimed Merkle.

“We mustn’t run it.”

“Why?”

“It will just about ruin him in this town,” said Tom.

“It’s coming to him, isn’t it?” demanded Merkle.

"Judge Belknap probably considers the new station a good investment for the village," Tom explained. "It's merely a point of view. I suggest calling on him. When he hears our side of it, he may change his mind."

"Of course he will when he finds we have it on him," said Merkle with a grim smile.

"Will you let me try?" asked Tom.

"It's news now," said Merkle obstinately. "It won't be after he changes his mind. The story will double our circulation."

"We'll soon have all the circulation we can handle without that," argued Tom.

"It isn't merely a matter of circulation," persisted Merkle. "It's a question of our duty to our subscribers. We owe it to them to print the news, to suppress nothing that concerns them or the public welfare. That's the first law in every honest newspaper shop. This grab needs exposing, and it's up to *The Herald* to expose it."

"I'm sorry, old man," said Tom gravely, "but I can't agree with you about Judge Belknap. I never expected to oppose you in anything, but I can't stand for this."

"We'd better put it to a vote," said Merkle. He walked over to the door he had just entered.

"Come here, Joe," he called. "We need you."

"The kid doesn't want to run our story," he said, as Joe entered the room.

"What?" exclaimed Joe.

"That's right," said Tom. "I'll have to lay down on this."

"But he ain't no friend of yours," remonstrated Joe, greatly surprised that Tom should scruple to even scores with the Judge. "Look at the rotten deal he handed you in New York."

"All the more reason why we must be just with him now," replied Tom.

Joe stared at him in wonder and disgust. Among all the ancient traditions of his race, Joe Weinstein held none in greater esteem than the eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth proposition. Joe loved his friends and hated his enemies as a matter of principle, and hated his friends' enemies besides, for the satisfaction it gave him.

"It's up to you, Joe," said Merkle.

"I say, go through with it," voted Joe. "We're not running a Sunday school sheet. We came up here for the dough."

"Two to one," said Merkle quietly.

"Listen, boys," pleaded Tom. "You've been bully pals and I'm grateful to you both. I owe you too much to ever stand out against anything you want to do, but I feel that you don't understand this thing. I know that Judge Belknap wouldn't do anything he didn't think was right."

"Do you think this grab is right?" asked the implacable Merkle.



"WILL YOU TELL ME..."

"I'll admit that it doesn't look right," replied Tom. "But you mustn't judge him as you would the political boss of a large city. He was born and brought up in this village and he has its interests at heart. He is looked up to and respected. He has always worked for what he honestly thought was the good of the town. I'm not saying this because he is Jane's father, but because I know the man. Won't you give him a square deal? Won't you give him a chance to explain?"

The face of Merkle, to whom his appeal had been chiefly addressed, remained changeless. The editor turned again to Weinstein, who had listened to Tom's plea with ill-disguised impatience.

"What do you think, Joe?" he asked.

"Oh," said Joe, "I need some excitement. Let's go down and see the train come in."

He took his hat down from its peg near the door and went out into the street. Tom followed his retreating figure with despairing eyes. Before he could renew his appeal to Merkle, his mother entered the room, rushed up to him and grasped his arm.

"You couldn't do a thing like that, Tom," she exclaimed, in a voice tremulous with anxiety. "You couldn't do it. I told Jane that it was all a mistake, and that you'd say so in your next issue."

"It's not a mistake, mother," said Tom sadly, "and the boys won't say that it is."

"The paper is yours, isn't it?" she cried.

"I'm only one of three," he answered.

Tom's mother looked indignantly at Merkle, who had walked over to the door and busied himself looking at nothing in particular out in the street.

"Well, of all the —" she began. Tom hushed her quickly.

"You mustn't blame them, mother," he said.

"They must protect their own interests in their own way."

But Mrs. Wilson was not to be silenced. She had been horrified by Jane's account of the attack made upon her old friend in the columns of *The Herald*, and she poured out the vials of her wrath on Merkle's averted head.

"It's just what I thought all along," she cried. "I knew they weren't your friends, but I made them welcome here because you said they were. I suspected they were trying to have a bad influence over you. Now I'm sure of it."

Tom, greatly distressed for Merkle's sake, tried in vain to check the torrent of her words. He had come to know that Merkle, for all his gruff exterior, was the gentlest and most sensitive of men where his affections were concerned. He hastened to repair the wrong done to that tender heart.

"I'm sorry you said that, mother." His voice shook as he gazed at Merkle's bowed head. "They've been the best friends a boy ever had."

Especially Merkle. He saved me from doing the most cowardly thing a man can do. If it hadn't been for him—" He stopped. The words choked in his throat as his mind flew back to that hideous night when Merkle had fought with him for his soul. "If it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't be here," he whispered hoarsely. "I wouldn't be — anywhere."

"Tom!" exclaimed his mother, horror-stricken as his meaning forced itself upon her.

"Yes, mother," he said. "It was as bad as that."

She put her arms around her boy and held him fast.

"Forgive me," she pleaded tearfully. "I didn't mean what I said."

He patted her gently on the shoulder. "It's all right, dear," he said. "I wanted you to know, that's all."

Mrs. Wilson looked at Merkle. A faint flush mounted to her cheeks as she walked slowly towards him.

"Doctor Merkle," she began timidly. He turned and faced her.

"Yes, mother," he said.

"Will you let me kiss you?" she faltered.

"In a minute," replied Merkle, and was fully fifty-nine seconds better than his word.

They smiled at each other in all friendliness and

good will. She returned to Tom and kissed him too, lest he should feel neglected.

"You'd better tell it to Jane, mother," said Tom. "I can't."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Wilson, suddenly recollecting her duties as a hostess. "I'd forgotten all about her."

She left the room. Tom threw himself dejectedly into a chair. Merkle walked over and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Well," he said. "What are you going to do, son?"

"If you boys have absolutely decided, I'll go along, of course," replied Tom, without a moment's hesitation.

He started to his feet as Jane entered from the kitchen. She had evidently intended to say something to him, something not altogether pleasant, if her expression counted for anything, but, seeing Merkle, she changed her mind and started for the street door. Tom placed himself in her path.

"Jane," he began, "I want you to understand —"

She cut his speech short. "I know," she said coldly. "Your mother told me." She started again for the door.

"Just a minute, Miss Belknap," said Merkle. She paused. Merkle turned to Tom.

"Say, son," he said, "I think you'd better run down and see the train come in."

"What for?" inquired Tom, surprised.

"I'm going to have a little chat with Miss Belknap," Merkle informed him.

Miss Belknap's nose went up several degrees at this confident announcement.

"If you don't mind—" she began.

"But I do mind," Merkle assured her. He turned again to Tom, who seemed in no hurry to be gone.

"Go on, kid," he said. "When the excitement is over, bring Joe back with you."

"I'd rather not stay now," said Jane, rather diffidently. Merkle's masterful way of doing things quite overwhelmed her.

"I think you'd better," replied Merkle, with a significance that piqued her curiosity.

"You'll miss that train," he said to Tom, with a great show of impatience.

Tom seized his hat and went. Jane stayed.

CHAPTER XXVIII

JANE MAKES IT UNANIMOUS

MERKLE quietly motioned Jane to be seated. Half wondering, half provoked, she obeyed. She wondered at her own docility. She was provoked to find herself so eager to hear what it was he had to say. He did not keep her waiting long to find out.

"Miss Belknap," he began. "I'm going to be very frank with you. If anything I say makes you feel like asking me to mind my own business, just check the feeling until I get through."

He paused for an instant, eying her intently as if to observe the effect of his words. What he saw must have satisfied him, for he plunged into his subject without further preface.

"Tell me," he demanded, "do you care anything at all for Tom?"

Jane half rose from her chair.

"Why," she began, flushing indignantly, "that's none of your —"

"That's all I want to know," said Merkle, interrupting her quickly. She sank back into her chair before his outthrust hand. "We'll pass that question for another," he went on. "What have

you against him?" Jane made another futile effort to rise.

"Really, Mr. Merkle," she protested, "I don't see —"

"I'll answer it for you," he said, giving her no chance to finish. "You think he's prejudiced against your father. He's not. On the contrary, he admires and respects him."

"He has a poor way of showing it," retorted Jane.

"Because he won't do what is wrong just to please you," said Merkle.

"Mr. Merkle!" she exclaimed, her indignation getting the better of her again at this audacious attempt to throw the blame on her. He stood before her with a faint, questioning smile on his face. It almost seemed as if he were expecting her to acknowledge the justice of his preposterous assertion.

"Your father is wrong in this matter," he went on firmly. "And what is more, he knows that he is. So why should the boy uphold him?"

His confident manner disconcerted her more than she was willing to admit. She was afraid to dispute him. Jane really knew nothing of the merits of her father's controversy with *The Herald* and its staff. She had jumped to the hasty conclusion that Tom was using his newspaper as a weapon with which to avenge his grievances, real or fancied,

against the Judge. Now she knew that she had been wrong in this, and she was beginning to suspect that there were probably two sides to the question. Her ignorance put her at disadvantage in face of Merkle's assurance. But she was unwilling to acknowledge the fact even to herself, certainly not to Merkle. Nor would she trust herself to discuss Tom's share in the matter, at least not now. She rose to her feet, thinking to effect a dignified retreat.

"I didn't stay to discuss my father's affairs," she said coldly, and started for the door.

"Oh, come now," coaxed Merkle. "I've got you down as a pretty sensible sort of a girl. If I didn't think you were open to conviction, I wouldn't keep you a moment. And I know that you wouldn't want the boy to do anything that wasn't straight. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," replied Jane unthinkingly, and could have bitten off her tongue for its avowal of her interest in Tom.

"Well, then, do you think it would be straight for him to throw down his partners, just to have you think well of him?"

"No," said Jane after a pause, unable to resist the kindly compulsion of his manner.

"Then why not give him a chance?" persisted Merkle. "Why not try to see his side of it, even if it is your father on the other?"

Jane flushed, hesitated, felt with alarm that she was yielding. "It isn't only this thing," she said stubbornly. "He has disappointed me so often."

"You mean in the city?"

"Yes," she replied with an effort.

"Isn't it t' same with every boy who goes to a large city for the first time?" asked Merkle.

"It wasn't what I expected of him," she answered.

"What did you expect?"

"Better things," she replied vaguely. This man's questions were so annoyingly direct.

"What can be better than the wisdom to know what is right and the courage to do it?" urged Merkle.

"I mean — when he was in the city — that wasn't right," she stammered. "She wasn't — I mean — he should have told me. He —"

She stopped and turned away, ashamed of her weakness, doubly shamed to have laid bare her heart's secret before the eyes of a stranger — a friend of Tom's. Merkle walked swiftly to her side.

"How could he?" he asked. "He'd lost his perspective, and let me tell you it's a terrible thing when an arc light begins to look like the sun and a bit of calico makes a noise like silk. I know," he continued earnestly, "because I've been there.

Don't go wrong on the boy just because of that. He's all the better for it now."

"I could have forgiven him everything but the girl," murmured Jane, in a voice that still trembled pitifully despite her.

"Didn't you advise him to go to New York?" asked Merkle suddenly.

"Yes," she admitted.

"Why?"

"I wanted him to get it off his mind. And I wanted him to see life as it is."

"Well, I guess he has," said Merkle. "He went to the city a boy. He's come back a man. Give him a chance, Miss Belknap."

"He hasn't asked for one," said Jane.

Merkle smothered a smile. "All the more to his credit," he hastened to reply. "Don't overlook the fact that you're engaged—to someone else."

"That isn't so," she exclaimed, with a sudden burst of energy. "I told father I'd never agree to it."

"Tom doesn't know that," said Merkle. "I'll tell him."

"No, please don't," she entreated. She held out a restraining hand, for Merkle seemed ready to bolt through the open door and put his threat into immediate execution.

"He ought to know," persisted Merkle, edging away.

"I'll tell him myself," she promised in desperation.

"Good," cried Merkle.

"And will you let me speak to father before you print anything more about him?" she asked.

"Suppose I see him myself," suggested Merkle. "Of course I can't speak for my partners, but if I can persuade Judge Belknap to see the light, I'm sure that even Joe will be willing to bury the hatchet."

"I'm so glad," cried the girl. "I do want you to be friends."

"That," replied Merkle, with a bow of acknowledgment, "is up to your father."

They had hardly arrived at this amicable conclusion when Tom appeared in the doorway. On seeing Jane still there, he hesitated, stammered an apology, and was about to withdraw when Merkle's voice arrested him and bade him stay. Jane whose manner reflected Tom's embarrassment, shrank out of sight behind the broad shoulders of her new friend as he turned and walked towards the door.

"It's all right," Merkle announced cheerfully. "We've finished. Where's Joe?"

Tom summoned Weinstein, who was hovering about in the outer darkness. Both entered.

"We've been talking it over," said Tom to Merkle, while Jane escaped to the other side of the room. "Joe is homesick. He says if we'll let him

have that four hundred, he'd like to quit. I told him that I'd hate to see him go, but that, if you're willing —"

"Does it go?" Joe broke in impatiently.

"I guess we can get together all right," said Merkle. He walked over to the door of his room, beckoning to Joe to come along. "We'll talk it over in here," he proposed.

Joe followed. "What's doing?" he demanded, with a suspicious glance around the room.

"You're not in on this," replied Merkle, stepping aside to let Joe pass through the door ahead of him. With his hand on the knob, he turned to Tom.

"She wants to see you, son," he said.

"I know," exclaimed Joe in a voice meant only for Merkle's hearing, but which came with startling distinctness to the ears of Jane and Tom. Fix-it stuff." He chuckled. "Do I get the four?"

"Sure," said Merkle. "Come along."

"Oh, you thirteen!" cried Joe, lifting up voice, face and hands in thanksgiving to the mysterious divinity that shapes our hunches. And, in this devout attitude, he passed out.

"I'll see you again, Miss Belknap," said Merkle. The door closed behind him.

Jane did not reply. She did not even raise her head. She stood near the wall, with averted face, clasping and unclasping her hands in an agony of

embarrassment. Tom stepped swiftly towards her but stopped short, just out of reach.

"Well," he said, at last.

Slowly she turned and slowly she lifted her burning face to his.

"Tom," she faltered. "I'm not engaged to Hez, and —"

"Jane," he cried rapturously, and the next thing she knew she was tight in his arms and sobbing quite joyously on his shoulder.

THE END